

# ‘Typical characters under typical circumstances’: The Slum Fiction of Dorothy Hewett and Ruth Park

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## Abstract

In this article I compare the representation of working people in two novels, Ruth Park’s *The Harp in the South* (1948) and Dorothy Hewett’s *Bobbin Up* (1959), as well as the ensuing critical debate about realism in their depictions of slum life in Sydney. I show that while Hewett’s work is more class-conscious and agitational, Park’s novel comes alive in deeper intersectional ways through her awareness of the interwoven structures of gender, class and race. Although Hewett’s novel culminates in a strike by women mill workers, Park reveals more of the individual strategies of survival that form part of the working-class lives she portrays. Thus, using Friedrich Engels’ critical point about ‘typical characters under typical circumstances’, I argue that while both writers try to capture the fundamental experience of working-class people, this is more successfully done in Park’s novel, both in terms of its literary realism and implicit radical politics.

## Keywords

Dorothy Hewett, Ruth Park, Working Class, Socialist Realism

## Introduction

In his famous letter (1888) to the English slum novelist, Margaret Harkness, Friedrich Engels offers the following critical definition of the concept of literary realism: ‘Realism, to my mind, implies, besides truth of detail, the truth in reproduction of typical characters under typical circumstances’ (Engels, 1975, p. 379). What Engels is referring to is the question of representativity: the way in which fictional characters can be viewed as both psychologically credible and sociologically recognisable. Thus, firstly, as individual portrayals that are more or less convincing. Secondly, in a broader sense, as representatives of the gender, class or race in which their lives are contextualized. This is also the way Ralph Fox frames the question in his classic study, *The Novel and the People*, where he argues that writers ‘should present man, as being at one and the same time a type and an individual, a representative of the mass and a single personality’ (Fox, 1944, p. 106). This link between literary text and context also informs Engels’s understanding of the meaning of ‘typical circumstances’ (Engels 1975, p. 379). Again, he sees an intrinsic connection between fictional characters and the social, economic, cultural and political nexus in which they are situated. However, as he also points out, there is no simple correspondence between these different levels of typicality. Referring to Harkness’s own novel, *A City Girl* (1887), he draws specific attention to her problematic depiction of the working class and the conditions in which they live:

Now your characters are typical enough, as far as they go; but the circumstances which surround them and make them act, are not perhaps equally so. In the *City Girl* the working

class figures as a passive mass, unable to help itself and not even showing (making) any attempt at striving to help itself. All attempts to drag it out of its torpid misery come from without, from above. (Engels, 1975, pp. 379-80)

Engels supports this critical observation by referring to the historical moment in which Harkness's novel is set, which was characterized by an upsurge of the Labour movement in Britain with strikes, demonstrations and the organisation of working-class political parties in what later historians have called 'the Great Unrest'. Despite her ambition to portray the lives of working-class people realistically, this aspect of collective struggle was absent from Harkness's novel:

The rebellious reaction of the working class against the oppressive medium which surrounds them, their attempts – convulsive, half conscious or conscious – at recovering their status as human beings, belong to history and must therefore lay claim to a place in the domain of realism. (Engels, 1975, p. 380)

At the same time, Engels insists he is not prescribing the writing of a 'point-blank socialist novel' (Engels, 1975, p. 380) in which both characters and setting reflect the political standpoint of the author. Instead, these elements of representation should emerge organically from the whole realistic mode of the narrative. Engels recommends in fact that the 'more the opinions of the author remain hidden, the better the work of art' (Engels, 1975, p. 380). Indeed, he suggests that a literary text could be so true to life, it could overcome the personal preferences of the author: 'The realism I allude to, may crop out even in spite of the author's opinions' (Engels, 1975, p. 380). The example he provides is Balzac, whose reactionary monarchist views were transcended by the art of Balzac the novelist. This is something Engels characterizes as one of the 'triumphs of realism' (Engels, 1975, p. 381), which Georg Lukacs later redefined as 'an honest and complete reflection of the real facts and connections of life over the social, political or individual prejudices of a writer' (Lukacs, 1974 p. 242).

### **Dorothy Hewett and Ruth Park**

I want to apply Engels's criteria of realism to two iconic Australian novels written by women whose work also falls into the category of slum fiction: Ruth Park's *The Harp in the South* (1948) and Dorothy Hewett's *Bobbin Up* (1959)<sup>1</sup>. These books are similar in many ways. They both depict the lives of working-class people in two rundown areas of Sydney. Park situates her novel in Surry Hills, which is only a few blocks away from Redfern, the setting of Hewett's novel. Significantly, they were both written by middle-class journalists who themselves lived in these suburbs for shorter periods of time. Their main personal and political difference was, however, that Hewett was a communist and Park a liberal. Thus, while Hewett's narrative is informed by her commitment to socialist realism, Park's novel is more narrowly focused on the life of one Irish family, the Darcys. On publication, both novels were also critically debated as literary depictions – realistic or not – of the Australian working class from the 1940s and 50s.

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'slum fiction' emerged in the late Victorian period in Britain to describe novels and stories that were set in the East End of London, an area characterized by overcrowded, dilapidated housing, poverty and squalor. This subgenre of working-class fiction was usually noted for its sensational, sometimes violent and often melodramatic plotlines, not least involving middle-class characters who go 'slumming' among the poor and destitute. See further, P. J. Keating. (1972. pp. 1-52).

By comparing the images of working-class people in these two novels, I want to see what critical conclusions can be drawn from their portrayal of slum life in Sydney at the time. I aim to show that while Hewett's work is more class-conscious and agitational, Park's novel comes alive in deeper intersectional ways through her awareness of the interwoven structures of gender, class and race. Although Hewett's novel culminates in a strike by women mill workers, it is the result of an intervention by members of the Communist Party, raising questions about independent working-class agency. In contrast, Park reveals more of the individual strategies of survival that form part of the slum lives she describes. Thus, using Engels' critical point about 'typical characters under typical circumstances', I argue that while both writers seek to capture the specific experience of working-class people, this is more successfully achieved in Park's novel, both in terms of its literary realism and implicit radical politics.

### ***Bobbin Up and The Harp in the South***

The two novels in question have been republished as modern 'classics' – Hewett's by Virago Press (1985)<sup>2</sup> and Park's by Penguin Books (2009). Both writers have therefore a certain canonical status in contemporary Australian literature.<sup>3</sup> While these novels became the starting point of long and successful writing careers, the initial critical reaction was much less positive. The main point of debate revolved around the issue of literary representation and the way this expressed itself through their working-class characters. In both cases this was also indirectly connected to the status of these writers themselves: Park as a New Zealander whose image of Australian people was thought to be too vulgarised. Hewett as a communist who was criticized for not making her female workers correspond more to the radical ideal of 'proletarian' heroines. As has been noted, this was also linked to whether or not the working class in Hewett's novel has the capacity to achieve its own social and political emancipation. In Park's case, similar doubts were raised about what was claimed to be her voyeuristic depiction of demoralized slum dwellers, as Susan McKernan notes:

Socialist realist criticism of Ruth Park's work [...] noted that she was sentimentalising the national tradition and her 'kitchen-sink' novels exploited the poor rather than liberating them. [Her] novels of city misery could not belong to a socialist realist canon since they depicted a degraded and passive minority suffering poverty. (McKernan, 1998, p. 22)

Hewett's participation in the Realist Writers' Group, which was formed to promote the cause of socialist realism in Australian writing, meant that her novel was also submitted to similar ideological scrutiny as to its level of realism, not least in terms of the reproduction of working-class speech:

The Realist Writers' Groups had been established to promote [a] vision of an alternative, working-class national literature in Australia. In practice, their rigid adherence to socialist realism led their members as often as not to adopt the role of censors rather than supporters. Hewett encountered this attitude from [Communist] Party members who complained the 'working class didn't talk like that'. (McLaren, 1995, p. 38)

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<sup>2</sup> Since it contains a new introduction by Hewett, all references will be to this 'classic' edition.

<sup>3</sup> In his comprehensive survey, *The Critical Reception of Bobbin Up*, Nathan Hollier not only documents the varying critical responses to Hewett's novel, but also its significance to the broader literary and political debate in Australia (1999).

Park complained she was caught in an impossible political bind: ‘Because I wrote about poor people I was a Communist. On the other hand because I wrote about poor people I was a capitalist – I wrote about them only to jeer, or, alternatively, to make money’ (*Fishing* 1994, p. 149). Critics of the novels doubted if their characters represented a true image of Australian working-class people. To complicate matters, Hewett herself claimed that the workers at the Jumbuck Woollen Mills in Sydney where she worked were in actual fact even more feckless than she had depicted them in her novel:

When *Bobbin Up* was criticized at special Communist Party meetings to discuss its strengths and weaknesses one of the principal criticisms was that it presented the Australian working class as ‘lumpen proletariat’ and ‘anarchistic’. What the critics failed to realize was that the working class I was writing about were exactly like that, unorganized, close to illiteracy, the ‘lower depths’. (viii)

More recent appraisals of the two writers have emphasized the specific gender aspects of their novels. Jill Greaves writes for instance: ‘Not only are Park’s characters urban dwellers, but the major protagonists are women and the stories are related from a feminine, even feminist point of view quite alien to the masculine bush ethos’ (13). Kerryn Goldsworthy observes that Park’s novel ‘is set in or around Sydney and deals with – among other things – social injustice and the plight of the poor, especially of poor women’ (120). Susan Lever argues that Hewett succeeded in going beyond the ideological constraints of her communist aesthetics: ‘If *Bobbin Up* manages to resist the worst clichés of the socialist realist novel it does so through an interest in women’s bodies which might place it within the Zolaesque tradition of projecting male fears and desires onto its female characters’ (151). Stephen Knight also remarks on the significance of a strong female presence in Hewett’s novel both at home and at work:

[B]y locating her story among women who are self-aware and interactive workers, Hewett gives them both autonomous realities and economic power, and she focusses her whole narrative through their response to work as much as the domestic context. (Knight, 1995, p. 73)

Since many of these critical responses revolve around the issue of literary realism, I want to examine in more detail the ways in which the two novelists deal artistically with the working class. In *Bobbin Up* the theme of class struggle forms the core of the novel. Yet, despite this emphasis on militant action, the image of the working women appears surprisingly static and blurred. There is little or no tangible character development, instead, the women seem to merge into one amorphous mass, something that Ralph de Boissiere pointed out already in his early review of the book (1959). However, he also goes on to claim that Hewett’s novel “is written from the revolutionary working class point of view” where she “sees life and characters in their dialectical development”. De Boissiere makes a distinction between the ordinary women characters who come “too much out of one mould” and that of Nell, about whom he says: “This is the first time I have come across an “unforced, truthful, human portrait of a communist in Australian literature” (36). These somewhat conflicting critical points will be returned to in more detail in my own discussion of Hewett’s novel.

Park provides, in my view, a much more nuanced understanding of how class, gender and race are reproduced through structures of power and oppression in ways we would today characterize as intersectional. Moreover, within these contexts, Park allows for a more contradictory and therefore dynamic narrative of working-class life. I will turn first to Hewett’s novel in order to examine its qualities as a work which ostensibly dramatizes the socialist realist trope of nascent class struggle.

### ***Bobbin Up and Socialist Realism***

In their alternative city history, *Radical Sydney*, Terry Irving and Rowan Cahill devote a chapter to ‘Dorothy Hewett and the Redfern Reds’. Here they trace the radical traditions of this working-class suburb and of the activities of the Communist Party at the time when Hewett was part of the local South Sydney Section. They also refer to the friction between the local branch and the Central Office of the Party who considered the Redfern members, including Hewett, to be too undisciplined and easy-going. When Hewett got a job at a local textile factory and tried to mobilize the women workers in support of the demand for equal pay, the communist dominated trade union bureaucracy opposed this as an unnecessary political distraction. Hewett’s novel can therefore be seen as writing back at those who were dismissive of her both as a communist and a woman:<sup>4</sup>

Before she was sacked for being eight months pregnant, Hewett worked in the Alexandria Spinning Mills. What she learnt there about gender and politics became the basis for her great working-class novel. At the annual meeting of the Textile Workers’ Union she had demanded equal pay for women workers but the male leadership ignored her. Knowing she would be sacked if the boss knew she was a Communist, she organised the other members of the Redfern branch to distribute an illegal bulletin at the factory gates. It opened with her then partner’s words: ‘There’s a name for a man who lives off women’. The title of the bulletin, ‘Bobbin Up’, became the title of her novel. (Irving & Cahill, 2010, pp. 269-70)

Hewett was well aware of the fact that she was considered an outsider in the factory, both politically and personally. She saw her decision to become a mill worker as ‘the kind of vague Utopian gesture that middle-class girls, trying to expiate their guilt, indulged in to ‘proletarianize’ themselves’ (*Introduction* 1985, p. x). As part of her social disguise, she tried to bridge the differences between herself and the other women workers by adopting a lower-class persona, in particular through the way she spoke: ‘Because of my Western Australian private school accent they all thought at first I was a Pommy anyway. I learnt to roughen my accent, and to be slower and more laborious in filling in my sick pay form. “You’re very handy with the pen there love” they said suspiciously’ (*Introduction*, 1985, p. xi). This aspect of literary slumming on Hewett’s part is revealing, especially when one compares her dismissive characterization of the real inhabitants of Redfern with her fictional account of the factory women:

Redfern was always the bottom of the heap. Foregathered there were the old, the halt, the maimed, the drunks, the mad, the unemployables, the substandard, the failures of society. The odd seemingly ‘respectable’ families were few and far between. (*Introduction*, 1985, p. xiii)

Hewett was clearly an untypical working woman living in typical slum surroundings, an experience that was short-lived and skewered by the feelings of political bad faith she had in her own investigatory role, something she described as ‘sincere dishonesty’ (*Introduction*, 1985, p. xv). At the same time, she maintained there was a genuine element of pioneering realism in her novel that gave a voice to women rarely heard before in Australian literature:

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<sup>4</sup> In an interview she gave with Nicole Moore on July 12 July 1998, Hewett spoke in terms of “my middle-class anarchism” at this time. (1999).

The portraits of the mill girls are ‘real’. They are living, breathing Australian working-class women who speak with a living tongue, and the mill itself as a metaphor for their lives grows larger than life and realer than real throughout the pages. Up to this time, and maybe ever since, there was little working-class literature in Australia. The lives of such women remained a mystery. They could not write themselves, and they had no spokesperson to translate them into literature. (*Introduction*, 1985, p. xv).

*Bobbin Up* is a collective novel whose episodic narrative zooms in and out of the lives of a group of ordinary women, all of whom work in the woollen mills in Redfern: Shirl, Beth, Dawnie, Beryl, Lil, Maisie, Jessie, Patty, Gwennie, Julie, Jeanie and Nell. Nell is the only member of the Communist Party, although it is in defiance of the Party that she begins to agitate among the female factory workers. The most significant thing about these women is that they are either married or hoping to become so. Romance and matrimony are clearly their main preoccupation. These are the post-Second World War years in Australia where an emergent consumerist lifestyle was very much oriented towards domestic homemaking.<sup>5</sup> There is however something of a clash of gender expectations between the young men of the area, who are mainly looking for a good time, and the young women who are trying to save themselves for their wedding night. Some of the girls fall foul of these conflicting pressures, one of whom is Shirl, now a single mother desperate to find a husband. The overall impression is however that while Hewett despises their romantic daydreams, she is not particularly interested in the women as individual victims of them. It is difficult to actually distinguish between the characters depicted in the novel. They all think, feel and talk very much along similar escapist lines. Only Nell stands out as an independent woman, whose husband is at home after being blacklisted from work as an agitator. She is also involved in a personal fight with the Communist Party, which is the single most important point of psychological tension in the story.

Communist Party officials criticized Hewett’s novel for portraying the ‘Australian working class as a “lumpen proletariat”’, to which she replied: ‘What the critics failed to realize was that the working class I was writing about were exactly like that, unorganized, close to illiteracy, the “lower depths”’ (*Introduction*, 1985, p. xiii). This reduction of the women to a stereotype is one of the most significant narrative weaknesses of the novel. The only indication of change occurs when Nell calls a strike after negotiations with the management about redundancies come to a halt. However, the novel ends on a fatalistic note of stasis: ‘Lil spread a bag on a butter box for the pregnant Beth. “Rest your legs luv,” she said. “It’s likely to be a long wait”’ (*Bobbin*, 1985, p. 204).

The experience of the strike is nevertheless the key to the novel and demands more critical attention. Not only to the significance of the action, but also to the leading role played by Nell. It brings to a head the conflict between Nell and the Communist Party about having lost touch with the working class of Redfern. In particular, Nell reacts to the abstract political jargon used by Party members, who she describes as ‘armchair Marxists’ (*Bobbin*, 1985, p. 117). In protest, she and her husband start producing a factory bulletin, ‘Bobbin Up’, written in a simpler way the women can relate to:

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<sup>5</sup> For a more theoretically informed discussion of this postwar cultural transformation, see Dougal McNeill, “Bobbin Up as a Social Reproduction Novel” (2020).

“Y’see these girls aren’t used to politics, they understand they’re bein’ pushed around by the boss, and tomorrer they’ll all be windy about doin’ their jobs. We all understand that feelin’. We’re all workers. But it’s no good givin’ them great hunks of straight politics. They’d use it for lavatory paper”. (*Bobbin*, 1985, pp. 128-9)

What becomes quickly clear, however, is that the workers cannot reach any higher level of class awareness without some sort of active communist guidance. Even though Nell’s bulletin is meant to be a political catalyst in this context, the prospect of the women mobilising for more than just their jobs remains limited:

To struggle ... that was all they could achieve, and to struggle meant to suffer and perhaps never to see your reward in a bigger pay packet on Friday. To struggle towards socialism, when all human progress would bring human security. To her it was logical and the mainspring behind the whole of life, but how to explain this to a mob of women who didn’t believe in socialism anyway? (*Bobbin*, 1985, pp. 121-2)

Nell’s dilemma is how to make the connection between herself as a communist and women workers who have no traditions of organized struggle. There is an unresolved contradiction in the novel between the fight against the sackings and for Nell’s more lofty vision of international socialism. The necessary leap from one ideological level to another is never really addressed. Nell remains entrenched in a utopian ‘no-man’s land of leftist dreams’, as she herself describes it (*Bobbin*, 1985, p. 121). Moreover, there seems to be a complete lack of correspondence between Nell’s characterization of the women as a conservative ‘mob’ and their potential role as part of a working-class vanguard. Thus, despite her ambition to write a socialist realist novel, Hewett ends up with a radical heroine who has no real political confidence in the workers she hopes to lead.

Although the conflict is still undecided by the end of the novel, the very existence of women on strike seems at least a partial victory. Perhaps the most telling example of their burgeoning consciousness is the decision by Shirl to stay on strike in the factory with her fellow workers instead of going to meet her fiancé at the registry office. It is a potentially devastating personal decision for her to make as a single mother who has finally found a man who will marry her. She chooses nevertheless to stay and miss her wedding. This most symbolic act of class solidarity in the novel appears, however, to spring from nowhere. Nor is there any real reason for Shirl not to take an hour or so off and get married since the strike action itself has lapsed into a waiting game. There is no logical explanation for Shirl having to make such a dramatic sacrifice. Her decision remains therefore both psychologically unconvincing and artistically contrived:

She had a mental picture of Jack, broad-shouldered in his best navy suit, shoes shined, hair slicked up, waiting for her to show, waiting for the bride that never came. She felt bloody savage. She couldn’t desert her mates but ... ah! well it was all the lucka the game and she’d never had any luck. (*Bobbin*, 1985, p. 197)

In her introduction to the novel, Hewett indicates she was in fact moving away from the Communist Party at the time of her working at the factory.<sup>6</sup> Even more significantly, she admits that the strike by women workers did not in fact take place: ‘There was never any talk of strike when I worked at the mill. The period of strikes in the Textile Industry was over, and the Communist Party was a dirty word’ (*Introduction*, 1985, p. xi). This lack of actual personal experience of being part of a strike is perhaps one of the reasons why the final section of the novel comes across as programmatic rather than narratively organic. There is never any indication of what thoughts and feelings the women have about getting involved in a strike for the first time. Instead, the whole event seems a piece of political wishful thinking, existing only in the pages of the novel. As Hewett later confirmed, the writing of the book was primarily the result of her own literary romance with Communism:

Looking back on the 36-year-old Communist who wrote *Bobbin Up* I am embarrassed at her proselytizing, stubborn blindness, this Antipodean Alice in Wonderland who had a protracted love affair with an idealized working class. (*Introduction*, 1985, p. xv)

This naïve projection of a militant working class finds its most utopian expression in the recurring image of the Soviet Sputnik satellite that crosses the sky at night in Australia. It becomes a metaphor of the struggle of the workers of the world, boosting their belief in a future proletarian revolution. Its reappearance inspires some of the most lyrical passages in the novel, each reflecting the political urgency of its idealized socialist message:

Millions turned in breathless wonder to watch its lonely flight, millions of hearts in the streets of the world beat a little faster, but none faster than the heart of Tom Maguire, Sydney wharf labourer, his thick, calloused hands gripping the back fence that hung over the Erskineville railway line [...] And with his finger went a host of fingers, white, black, brown and yellow, stubby fingers with grease under the nails. “*There she goes.*” It was a song pouring like a ladle of boiling steel from the throats of the world’s toilers. (Hewett, 1985, pp. 98-9)

### ***The Harp in the South***

When it was first published after winning a literary competition sponsored by the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1946, Ruth Park’s novel, *The Harp in the South*, met with an outcry of criticism as to the unrealistic depiction of characters and setting. Park was accused of denigrating Australians by portraying them as incompetent slum dwellers which the novel both sensationalized and sentimentalized. Readers and critics were shocked by the conditions she described and wondered if, as a middle-class New Zealander, she had any real understanding of the lives of hard-working Australians. In her autobiography, Park recalled the overwhelmingly negative response to her novel. She was for instance dismayed by the comparison between herself and the Australian crime writer, Jon Cleary, whose debut novel, *You Can’t See ‘Round Corners* (1947), portrayed a group of petty criminals in Sydney’s slum suburbs.

How did I differ from Jon? In two ways only, I was a woman and I was not an Australian. In an age when the words *should not* and *ought not*, with or without justification, were profusely applied to women, I had stepped over the invisible boundary line. Similarly,

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<sup>6</sup> Hewett’s subsequent political and aesthetic trajectory is traced by Fiona Morrison in “Leaving the party: Dorothy Hewett, literary politics and the long 1960s” (2012).



though Jon Cleary [...] was an Australian, an insider, and thus allowed to do so. I was a New Zealander, a foreigner, and could not be permitted to do the same. My novel had to be either misrepresentation or derogatory criticism. (*Fishing*, 1994, p. 159)

Jill Greaves also remarks on the high literary hopes surrounding the novel's first newspaper serialization and the ultimate sense of disappointment about her apparent failure to capture the authentic experience of post-war Australia:

'Perhaps some critics had expected that the *Sydney Morning Herald's* competition would finally produce the Great Australian Novel that would establish Australian literature firmly within the canon of English literature; if so, a novel about slums, fecklessness and apathy might not have been what they had in mind' (Quoted in Greaves, 1998, p. 12).

The debate quickly became political when the novel was condemned as an example of reductive socialist realism. David Carter wrote in this context of what he saw as Park's limited literary awareness: '[T]he term 'social realism' has overlapped with 'socialist realism'. But while the latter is derived from an explicit theory, the former is rather the result of a *lack* of theory' (Carter, 1998, p. 23). In reply, Park insisted that she was not a campaigning writer, even though her novel did speed up the process of slum clearing in Redfern (Carter, 1998, p. 23).

Park's narrative is without doubt about the urban working class, focussing on a family where the father, Hughie, and eldest daughter, Roie, both have factory jobs. Their mother, Mumma, stays at home keeping everyone fed, washed and clothed, while also looking after their Grandma, their youngest daughter, Dolour, their son Thady, as well as numerous lodgers. The overall impression is of a large, hectic yet self-contained community of ordinary people who, although not having much money, are certainly not impoverished or helpless. The biggest threat to their financial security is the alcoholism of the father, even though this never seems to prevent him from being employed. Throughout the novel, it is the women who nevertheless function as the main focalizers in what is primarily a narrative of class and gender confinement.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast to the cramped, vermin infested conditions within doors, the street outside represents a level of freedom but also of danger, especially for children. Park depicts the precarity of existence as an endemic part of working-class life. Early on in the narrative, a little boy is knocked under the wheels of a brewery truck, killing him. The point is repeated when Thady just disappears while playing out in the street. He is never found. This absence of her son haunts the mother throughout the story, a loss that is later revisited when Roie suffers a miscarriage.

The ever-present sense of social vulnerability is offset however by occasional bursts of collective carnivalesque revelry and revolt. One such event is the annual street bonfire on New Year's Eve where the rule of law is temporarily contested. When police and firemen try to douse the communal bonfire with water, the defiance of the slum dwellers rekindles some of the rebellious traditions of their Irish origins.

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<sup>7</sup> In her discussion of the aspects of Catholicism, eugenics and abortion in *The Harp in the South* and *Poor Man's Orange*, Caitlin Still provides an illuminating critical insight into the image of the 'good mother' in these novels. See further, *The Drover's Wife Speaks: A Literary and Cultural History of Maternal Citizenship in Australia 1890 -2020*. (2020).

The policeman, struggling at the centre of the crowd, was a man besieged. Half a dozen old women battered him around the waist, and the taller members of the crowd clunked him with anything handy. [...]. Grandma [...] was making a great to-do about getting a suitable potato. She [...] had her arm raised to throw it, murmuring: "Great splaw-footed spalpeen." And "I'll send it clean through his brisket," when the horrified Mumma seized it from her hand. Grandma was bereaved, for she came from a long line of wild boys and girls who had specialized in potting King's Men from behind hedges, in the insurrections. (*Harp, 1977, p. 93*)

On an individual level, Park provides a range of finely drawn characters that populate the slum shanties. It is in the detail of their lives that these figures emerge as distinct and psychologically credible portrayals. One notable example is Delie Stock, an elderly woman who runs a chain of bars and brothels in the area. She is a minor character in the story, yet one who personifies the mixture of rugged individualism and altruism that is typical of the area. Not surprisingly, she is viewed by the Church as having a destructive impact on the community. Thus, when she offers to pay for a children's Christmas picnic, her donation is refused by the priest as tainted money. Delie's angry reaction reveals a sharp self-awareness of the patriarchal norms that circumscribe the lives of working-class women:

"You don't know what it's like being a woman. Everyone's got it in for you, even God. Even God [...] What chance does any woman get around here? [...]. I'm as good a woman as anyone else, and what's more," bawled Delie Stock ... that money wasn't earned the way you think. I won it in a lottery, and if you want to know which one, just stick yer beak in the newspaper and read me name amongst the prize-winners". (*Harp, 1977, p. 51*)

Later, when Roie is violently assaulted and loses her baby, Delie gives her father a handful of cash to help pay for her recovery as an expression of female solidarity. In what might have become a moment of Dickensian sentiment, this spontaneous street encounter captures perfectly the awkward bonds of mutual support among the slum dwellers:

"Here, you see that kid gets all she needs, Hugh Darcy, and if you're hard up, come around here and get some more" [...]

"Yere!" protested Hughie feebly. "What's this? Cripes, I can't do it."

"Go on, go on," croaked Delie Stock. She was so overcome by her own generosity that she almost cried. She was a character, if ever there was one, she reflected, her the worst woman in the Hills, and giving this old goon a handout when he needed it most. (*Harp, 1977, p. 135*)

Roie becomes the key character in this context, whose troubled search for love unmasks the subjection of women to constricting gender norms. As Shulamith Firestone observes: '[L]ove, perhaps even more than child-bearing, is the pivot of women's oppression today'. (Firestone, 1970, p. 113). In Roie's case, these two spheres collide when her life is transformed by the grim reality of an unwanted pregnancy. After being seduced and abandoned by her first boyfriend, her tragic predicament explodes the romantic myths of marriage and motherhood on which her future hopes have been built. Jill Greaves writes that 'the constraint imposed on the poorly-educated slum-dweller by inarticulateness is made apparent through Roie' (Greaves, 1998, p. 29). This comment about 'inarticulateness' is somewhat surprising, however, since it reproduces a social and literary prejudice about the limited sensibilities of working-class people. It ignores the profound turmoil of Roie's feelings when she tries to make sense of her

physical and moral transgression. There is also a revealing contrast in the way the two novels deal with similar issues. Most certainly, young women make calamitous personal choices in Hewett's novel. However, while Hewett leaves her female characters still stuck within their romantic illusions, Park explores the profound anguish of a working-class woman whose whole life has begun to unravel.

When Roie's fears of pregnancy prove to be true, Park shows her complete abandonment in having to choose between the perils of a backstreet abortion or the stigma of becoming an unmarried mother in Surry Hills. Park's novel is certainly of its time in this respect. The issue of illegal abortion would have been an extremely sensitive one to write about in the 1940s. According to Nicole Moore, the question was nevertheless addressed by several pioneering female novelists like Ruth Park. Despite this, Australian women still had to wait until well into the 20th century to gain the right to decide over their own bodies.<sup>8</sup> In one of the most powerful and disturbing scenes in the novel, Park describes Roie's feelings of absolute horror as she waits her turn to see the male, backstreet abortionist:

There was a low mutter of a man's deep voice; the sound of metal clinking on china; and a horrible gagged scream which diminished into gurgling moans [...] The whole atmosphere of that dirty old slum house was instinct with mystery and evil. It seemed to gloat, and hold to itself all the murders that had been committed within its walls. The smell of blood was there, and the miasma of cowardice and stealth and cruelty. (*Harp*, 1986, pp. 122-3)

This is political in a very personal way. At this point Roie comes to represent the experience of all women whose bodies are objects to be desired, disciplined and punished. Running back out into the street, Roie's traumatic exposure continues when she narrowly escapes being raped by a gang of sailors. There is a powerful sense of feminist rage at this point in the novel, not least through Roie's internalization of the guilt for what has occurred:

Until now she had felt no real moral wrong in what she had done or what she had contemplated, but now, as though she had walked into a great shadow, the world was different. It wasn't that she had been going to have a baby that made her sink down to the lowest depths of grief and shame but the knowledge that she would have murdered it, if it had not been for her own cowardice. (*Harp*, 1986, pp. 128-9)

The final phase in this intersectional continuum of gender, class and racial tensions in the novel is the way Roie's family react towards her falling in love with a Black man. It is another radical aspect of Park's novel in choosing not to shy away from the issue of working-class racism. Thus, there is an unexpected complication in the character of the mother, previously the most sympathetic and caring member of the family, who suddenly vents her racist concerns about the colour of Roie's fiancé, Charlie. Since both Roie and her father would have worked with Aboriginal people at the factory, their attitude to Charlie is shown to be very different from that of the mother. This confrontation ends in what is an almost surreal

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<sup>8</sup> Moore writes: "Working class knowledges of abortion as a useful and accessible method of separating sex and reproduction seem to surface rarely, often only in radical and utopic cultural texts; they are repressed erstwhile in a sphere labelled private, rather than everyday, and in bodies passively unconscious and inevitably maternal. Essentially an admixture of melodrama, romance and social realism, abortion plots in women's realism are rarely 'realistic', and pursue their ideological work at odds with another 'everyday' knowledge of abortion circulating in private discourse, even as they pretend to revelation, to the brave and unguarded flaunting of abortion taboos" (1996). See also, Patricia Grimshaw (1988).

mixture of racial prejudice, class solidarity and shameful family history. It is a short, heated exchange, one that nevertheless captures the uneven combination of tolerance and bigotry among the slum dwellers that is typical of Park's eye for psychological detail in the novel.

"I'll be losing her," wept Mumma. "She'll go away and I'll never see her anymore" [...]  
 Hughie sat up and glared at her, and Mumma tentatively moved away, for he looked as though he were going to thump her. "Now, none of that talk," he said decisively. "If Roie's picked her man, then she's picked him, black, white or brindle, and we can talk with a hangman in the family."  
 "The hangman's in your family," bristled Mumma. "Never was a Killer to make a living by other people's necks."  
 "Be that as it may," said Hughie firmly [...] The boy's good and solid, and I'll have nothing said against him." (*Harp*, 1986, p. 197)

### Concluding remarks

Friedrich Engels's comments concerning the realistic depiction of the working class in literature have informed this critical comparison between the slum novels of Dorothy Hewett and Ruth Park. My conclusion is that taken as a whole, Park's novel stands out as a more nuanced intersectional portrayal of working-class life.<sup>9</sup> Hewett's attempt to fit her female characters into the ideological trope of the socialist realist novel ends up imposing a problematic political agenda on the fictional narrative that ultimately undermines its artistic integrity. Park, in contrast, confronts the experience of people struggling within overlapping structures of gender, class and race. The drama of Park's narrative springs from a deeper understanding of the strategies of survival that are forced on working-class women in an everyday context of social and economic disempowerment. In the end, it is this closer attention to the complex reality of both characters and conditions that makes Park's novel still feel vibrantly authentic and politically compelling.

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<sup>9</sup> Ruth Park wrote not only a sequel to her novel, entitled *Poor Man's Orange* (1949), but also a prequel, *Missus* (1985), both of which were critically acclaimed. All three novels were subsequently republished together as a trilogy, *The Harp in the South Novels*, by Penguin Books, (1987).

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