

# ["midnight lake,” "an absolutely ordinary rainbow,” and other poems – an analysis ...](https://assignbuster.com/midnight-lake-an-absolutely-ordinary-rainbow-and-other-poems-an-analysis-of-contemporary-australian-values/)

Australian poet Les Murray’s poems often reflect his own belief and value system, as well as provide a new outlook on social issues, such as homelessness and drugs, as shown in ‘ Midnight Lake’. He also highlights the importance of rural Australian culture, claiming that poetry can ‘ model the fullness of life and bring our fullest being in to play’. Natural sacramentalism and the significance of ordinary lives, as shown in ‘ An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow’ and ‘ Spring Hail’, are common themes throughout his works. Murray also frequently draws upon Aboriginal culture and how their traditions are gradually being degraded by the Americanisation of Australia, as shown by ’Sydney and the Bush’ and ‘ Inside Ayer’s Rock’.

Les Murray uses everyday language in a skilled and sensitive way throughout his poems to reflect the values of Australian society and subsequently open people’s eyes to new ideas and perceptions. An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow serves the aesthetic purpose of reflecting on the social construction of masculinity in Australia and the way in which ordinary human experiences can be something sacramental. Through the use of allusion, synecdoche and symbolism, Murray explores the human condition and how people yearn to have a sense of belonging within Australian society, especially when it comes to masculinity. Inside Ayer’s Rock, on the other hand, serves the ideological purpose of criticising the commodification of Aboriginal culture. Murray shows how Aboriginal culture has been misrepresented, capitalised and mocked through the use of irony, imagery and symbolism. Through using evocative language, the fake and artificial nature of their commodified heritage is highlighted and reminds the contemporary audience to not fall for the counterfeit veneer that shrouds Aboriginal customs.

The artificiality of commodified Aboriginal culture throughout Inside Ayer’s Rock is presented through the use of industrial imagery. The title “ Inside Ayer’s Rock” does not actually refer to Uluru, but rather the resort and gift shop twenty miles from the tourist destination and Aboriginal sacred place. The setting is described as having “ paired fluorescent lights” on “ steel pillars” with a “ haze-blue marquee cloth” acting as the ceiling. The first four lines immediately present the idea that the resort is not only highly industrial, but also a fake and artificial facade which contrasts the natural beauty of Uluru. Artificiality is also emphasised through the line “ dusted coolabah trees”, providing the image that there are cardboard cut-outs of native Australian flora that have been dusted by the workers there, which further plays into the notion that there is nothing natural about the resort. There is a clear juxtaposition between the natural Aboriginal culture and the man-made misrepresentation.

The way in which people have capitalised on Aboriginal traditions in Australia is also criticised through the use of irony. The line about a “ sheet-iron Dreamtime Experience that is turned off at night” is highly ironic – a ‘ dream’ cannot be ‘ turned off at night’. The line emphasises the fact that an age-old storytelling tradition has been capitalised on and lost all merit because of the way it is sold to the public. The owners of the shopfront have fashioned their opening hours to a time that they think would attract the most tourists without taking into account the true experience that is intended. They’re therefore making more money this way and further benefiting from a tradition that isn’t even their own – one of the highest forms of cultural appropriation. The idea of televisions that “ talk in gassy colours” further emphasises the point that Aboriginal culture has been exploited. Since Ayer’s Rock is a tourist attraction, the televisions are most likely playing documentaries about native Australians and their heritage to lure people in; “ gassy colours” further evolves the idea of artificiality, too.

The degradation and mockery that’s been made of Aboriginal culture is shown in the poem through the use of symbolism and irony. “ Near the entrance, where you pay for fuel, there stands a tribal man in rib-paint and pubic tassel” accentuates just how much the Aborigines have been degraded by society. The whole notion of natives wearing “ pubic tassel” is a tourist misrepresentation that drips irony. The cardboard Aborigine is there as a photo opportunity and is symbolic of the distorted image people have of their culture. When people pose for a picture, they are further degrading Aboriginal tradition by blindly enforcing a humiliating stereotype. They find the cut-out so profound and bizarre that they have to pose for a photo. The bathos in the final line “ In beyond the children’s playworld there are fossils, like crumpled old drawings of creatures in rock” further evolves the idea that Aboriginal heritage has been blindly disregarded. A multitude of misrepresentations has been left to fester in tourist destinations such as Ayer’s Rock, which Murray believes will gradually lead to Aboriginal culture being totally degraded and devalued by Australian society.

Through the use of irony, metaphor and symbolism, Murray exhibits just how much Aboriginal culture has been chiseled down, through misrepresentations, into just a shell of what it used to be. Beyond the rich imagery, there is an underlying theme of how a vast culture has been materialised and turned into an artificial commodity which is capitalised on. Just as much as Murray shows that Uluru has been disregarded as a highly sacramental place for the Aborigines by tourists, he demonstrates that ordinary human experiences can be sacramental and how people yearn to feel accepted in An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow.

Stereotypes surrounding masculinity in Australia are explored in the poem through Murray’s use of metaphor and synecdoche. The title An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow is a metaphor for the display of public grief and is significant because it acts as the basis for the poem’s aesthetic purpose. A rainbow is a familiar phenomenon that is often regarded as beautiful and elicits certain emotional responses. It’s an ordinary occurrence and almost every human has seen a rainbow once in their life, just as most people have experienced the emotion grief. Sadness is a part of day-to-day life, yet, when it is displayed in public, like the rainbow, it’s seen as peculiar. The mentioning of “ uniforms” that are “ back in the crowd” represent conformity and how people blindly accept enforced ideals, especially those surrounding masculinity and the repressing of emotions. The men in uniforms “ try to seize” the man, further evolving the idea that expressing grief in public is not expected of a true man. The event has caused a disruption, even though it’s just a natural, cathartic human response to grief. This elevates the occurrence to something supernatural: The men in uniforms do not know how to react, so they attempt to stop him, conveying that even though an everyday emotion is being publicly expressed, it has disrupted the conformist way of everyday life.

The exploration of the human condition and how people yearn to feel accepted within Australian society is also shown through deliberate referencing to real life locations, repetition of allusions and use of Australian idioms, which creates a sense of understanding among Murray’s audience. Through using social hubs and gatherings within Sydney, Murray creates a sense of familiarity with his Australian audience: “ The word goes round Repins, the murmur goes round Lorenzinis”. Australian idioms such as “ fellow” are also used, which adds another layer of familiarity. These allusions help mimic the effect of realism and allow the reader to identify with the poem and feel connected with it.

The idea of a man weeping in a public place, acting as a reflection on Australian masculine ideals, is demonstrated through Murray’s use of Judeo-Christian discourse and symbolism, which adds a sacramental element to the occurrence. The weeping man is constructed as some kind of prophet – someone who has the courage to openly express his feelings in a primal way. His tears are redemptive, cathartic and regenerative, breaking through the carefully composed ideals constructed by people in the city and the Australian attitude to the privacy of grief. Phrases and words such as “ judgements of peace”, “ a halo” and “ Paradise” make the event a somewhat spiritual experience and suggest a Judgement Day scenario. Similar to Jesus, who wept in the Garden of Gethsemane, the man weeping in a public place demonstrates how he is breaking the masculine ideals which engulf Australian society.​

Les Murray’s poetry uses language in a specially skilled and sensitive way to communicate particular aesthetic and ideological purposes. The degradation and commodification of Aboriginal culture is criticised throughout Inside Ayer’s Rock where Murray demonstrates how misrepresentations and twisted stereotypes have devalued their traditions and sacred icons, such as Uluru. On the other hand, An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow reflects on the masculine ideals that are held up in Australian society and champions how ordinary human experiences can be something sacramental. Murray has unquestionably been a major figure in contemporary Australian literature and continues to be a cultural critic through his poetry.​