

# **Discuss the Impact of the Particulars of Landscape or Place in Formulating ‘National/Cultural’ Identity and Meaning in Australian Literature**

By Natalie Harman for EGL205: Imagined Homelands: An Exploration of Australian Literature.

Ostensibly, William Hart-Smith’s poem ‘Baiaimai’s Never-failing Stream’ describes an interaction with the Australian landscape in order to successfully explain Indigenous Australian understandings of creationism. However, a deconstructive reading of the poem will reveal that this success is hindered by overt ideological tensions introduced through the speaker’s ethnicity and biblical intertextuality evoked through the poem’s form. Together, these ideological tensions raise concerns of cultural appropriation and inauthenticity. Firstly, these claims will be demonstrated by showing that Hart-Smith uses extended metaphor, symbolism, and imagery to show that Indigenous Australian mythology allows individuals to connect with the external landscape. Then it will be shown that Hart-Smith introduces ideological tensions by using language choice to construct a non-Indigenous speaker. After that, it will be shown that the poem’s form increases this ideological tension through intertextuality by echoing the structure of biblical verses in the King James Bible.

The central argument of ‘Baiaimai’s Never-failing Stream’ is that Indigenous Australian mythology allows individuals to connect with the external landscape. Hart-Smith conveys this argument through extended metaphor, symbolism, and imagery. The stream and the stars featured in this poem are symbolic of man and Baiaimai, an over-arching creative figure in Indigenous Australian mythology (Massey, 2007, 578). This claim of symbolism is supported by Hart-Smith’s use of extended metaphor to emphasise the sheer disparity in scale between the celestial stream of stars and the actual stream. The “far white mist of stars” is vast, intangible, and, as stated in line seven, “there, far up there” in the heavens, whereas the stream is localised, tangible, and down on the Earth. This mirrors the perceived differences between humanity and gods. After elucidating this symbolism, Hart-Smith uses imagery to describe the speaker’s interaction with the Australian landscape. The speaker’s interaction with the Australian landscape is detailed through tactile and thermal imagery in lines seven to eight – “fingers/dabbling among those cold stones” – along with the visual and aural imagery in line two – “pebbles and clear water running over them”. Conversely, the stars are solely depicted through visual imagery – “white mist” – in line six. When the speaker feels the stream running through his fingertips, he comes to understand what is otherwise beyond him; that is, the stars in the sky, which are symbolic of Baiaimai. This not only connects the speaker to his maker, but also allows him to connect with the Australian landscape. By using extended metaphor, symbolism and imagery in this way, Hart-Smith successfully relays his argument to the reader that Indigenous Australian mythology enables individuals to connect with the Australian landscape.

However, the success of Hart-Smith’s argument is diminished by overt ideological tensions in the poem that, when combined, create concerns of cultural appropriation and

inauthenticity. The most prominent of these tensions is the non-Indigenous speaker. The speaker's ethnicity becomes clear after examining Hart-Smith's use of language choice to construct a non-Indigenous voice. This is evident through phrases such as "in my mind" in line one, "linking most strangely" in line three, and "at one and the same time" in line five. Through these phrases, Hart-Smith emphasises that his speaker is non-Indigenous, and therefore cannot truly connect with the Australian landscape through Indigenous Australian mythology without committing an act of cultural appropriation by "convey[ing] in a language that is not [his] own the spirit that is [his] own" (Rao, cited in Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, 2002, 38). This tension introduced by the speaker's ethnicity is heightened through the intertextual links evoked by Hart-Smith's use of free verse. Page states that Hart-Smith "uses the free-verse rhythms of the King James Bible", exclaiming that the opening line of the poem "could almost be a quotation from one of the psalms" (2010, 94). The combined effect of these two overt ideological tensions is cultural appropriation, which renders the central argument of Hart-Smith's poem ineffective due to inauthenticity.

At first it appeared that William Hart-Smith used extended metaphor, symbolism, and imagery to successfully argue that Indigenous Australian mythology allows individuals to connect with the Australian landscape. However, a deconstructive reading of the poem revealed overt ideological tensions that detracted from this argument's success. The most prominent ideological tension was Hart-Smith's construction of a non-Indigenous speaker through his choice of language. This ideological tension was reiterated by an intertextual link to the King James Bible evoked through Hart-Smith's use of free verse. Together, these tensions revealed that this poem is an inauthentic portrayal of Indigenous Australian mythology.

## List of References

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