

ENGLISH: *ROMULUS MY FATHER*

The struggle to belong and find one's place is significant in the lives of some people.

In what ways is this struggle represented in your prescribed text and at least ONE other text of your own choosing?

Within most people is the intrinsic desire to attain a sense of belonging, form an identity and hence find one's place in the world. The experience of belonging as complex, dynamic and often conflicting however, means this desire often engenders a struggle, whereby the individual must face and overcome obstacles and barriers to belonging in society. This struggle is characterised by transient and often damaging relationships, cultural conflict and exclusion and the attempt to reconcile the values and paradigms of one's state of mind with extrinsic connections. This struggle can be represented as both formative and destructive for an individual's sense of purpose and self-worth. Raimond Gaita's bildungsroman *Romulus, My Father*, Sylvia Plath's semi-autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* and T.S. Eliot's poem *The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock* are a testament to the individual's complex struggle to belong.

Conflicting cultural value sets can engender a significant cultural struggle to belong, often characterised by a damaging process of alienation, as for Romulus in *Romulus, My Father*. As Romulus 'fled home in 1935', in search of a new life, he faced the challenge of integrating into new cultures. This struggle often meant to forego his identity to gain a sense of acceptance, 'A little embarrassed by his dark complexion, he called himself a gipsy and later, in Australia, an Aborigine' epitomises this notion. The imagery of transmutation illustrates Romulus' struggle to belong in different cultures as destabilising for his sense of identity. Furthermore, this struggle was compounded in Australia as 'It never seriously occurred to them to call him by his name, Romulus. They called him Jack.' This quote reflects the uni-cultural outlook of Australian society in the post-war moment, affecting an essential paradox in belonging, as to accept Romulus to their culture, they are transforming him. This cultural estrangement simultaneously reduces Romulus to passivity, as he ultimately resigns in his struggle to belong, 'A typical immigrant of the time – [he] had long come to accept what fate dealt him and felt no resentment or indignation.' Thus Gaita demonstrates how a struggle to belong that is destructive for one's identity can reduce one's desire to attain a that experience, leading to resignation and alienation.

The Bell Jar so too presents this cultural struggle to gain acceptance; as Esther attempts to conform to society's oppressive expectations the challenge becomes overbearing, significant but destructive. However unlike Romulus, Esther is able to overcome this struggle, achieving belonging through emotional human relationships. The paradoxical objectivity of Plath's confessional memoirs allows for Esther's struggle to be represented without counterfeit, illustrating how one's state of mind can contribute to the struggle to belong. Esther initially saw her society, 'Through a key hole to a door I couldn't open', reflective of the sustained metaphor of the bell jar, a restrictive, entrapping internal turmoil that prevented her from engaging with her society, much like Romulus' isolating mental breakdown in *Romulus, My Father*. Her struggle to conform the values and ideals of her 1960s consumerist culture is also a prevalent obstacle in her struggle, 'I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't decide which fig to choose', illustrating this paralysis of choice under the weight of oppressive expectation. The imagery of starvation parallels previous images of asphyxiation for Esther, the fig tree symbolic of her society that she perceives to ostracise her personal values. Finally however, 'Dr. Nolan led me through a door into fresh, blue-skied air', liberating imagery of blue symbolic of this formative relationship. In these ways Plath presents Esther's struggle as a process of failure and success, its significance exemplified by her ingenuity in seeking alternate sources of belonging. Her personal emotional connections with others are illustrated to supersede her sense of cultural alienation, as competing sources of belonging have a formative effect, allowing her to champion her struggle for meaning and acceptance.

Conversely to Esther, Raimond experiences severe emotional trauma through relational transience and conflict, which engender his struggle to belong, forcing him to pursue cultural acceptance as a significant facet of his identity growing up in *Romulus, My Father*. Raimond's relationship with Christine, who, although 'Her physical presence [him] me more than food', is ultimately destabilising. The comparative tone Raimond utilises reflects his deep affection for his mother, however this is superseded in his later childhood by her 'negligence', the newly objective language demonstrative of his warped relationship and the struggle to find belonging therein. This dispassion becomes a catalyst for Raimond's conflict with Romulus, 'You don't love me' illustrative of this through a denunciatory tone. Further, in Romulus' mental dissolution, 'My father's insanity cast its shadow over everything I did or thought'. The metaphor of the shadow illustrates how his relationship permeated his state of mind, engendering a persisting struggle to fight emotional loss and regain and sense of contentment and support. Raimond's maturing 'desire to live a "normal" life was strengthened by the conformist aspirations of teenage culture', connotations of conformity and assimilation reflective of his will to join the Marlborough community as a new avenue for emotional connection and companionship, effectively enabling him to leave behind his familial suffering. Gaita thus presents the significant struggle for a maturing individual to belong amidst transient and degenerative familial relationships, illustrating an avenue to overcome this as cultural engagement with one's local community.

T.S. Eliot's *Prufrock* epitomises the struggle against transient, fleeting human relationships, similar as for Raimond in *Romulus, My Father*, asserting however that in combination with cultural alienation and an ability to balance internal values with reality, the individual's struggle to find acceptance and purpose can only lead to failure. An epigraph inaugurates the poem with an allusion to Dante's *Inferno*, establishing an image of exile and desolation that characterises *Prufrock*. Although *Prufrock* claims to have 'known people, carnal imagery implied, there is no sense of lasting connection or comfort in the sordid sexual encounters, rather the stream-of-consciousness style of the poem illustrates the instantaneous shift to, 'eyes that fix you in formulated phrase'. Furthermore, 'In the room women come and go/Talking of Michelangelo', demonstrates *Prufrock's* pathetic attempt to engage with others, and attain a sense of belonging, in this way predicating the inadequacy of the modern man, whose self doubt induces failed relationships. Finally, the image of the 'tie pin' with which he attempts to 'assert' himself to women and society is inverted, *Prufrock* rather becoming 'Sprawling on a pin/When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall'. Thus Eliot culminates *Prufrock's* struggle to belong in a resounding failure, as without the strength of 'karakter' of Romulus, his timidity denies him connections to others and his society.

Thus our innate desire to belong does not always result in triumph in our struggle against transient, dispassionate relationships and culturally exclusive societies. However Gaita's *RMH*, Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Eliot's *Prufrock*, do all portray the significance and complexity of the individual's struggle to attain belonging and find purpose.