

ENGLISH: *ROMULUS, MY FATHER*

Connections made with people, places and the larger world can all create a sense of belonging. *Romulus, My Father* a novel by Raimond Gaita explores this idea through the exploration of experiences and notions of identity, relationships, acceptance and understanding. These ideas are similarly explored and represented in, *One Night the Moon*, a short film by Rachel Perkins. Both composers highlight themes of belonging within family, place and relationships and express how ones identity is dramatically affected when they fail to belong.

Family is a unit in which enriches experiences of belonging and this is portrayed clearly in *Romulus, My Father*. Gaita highlights the sense of protection and fortification found in the family unit seen through the image of “strong, bare, sun-darkened arms on either side of me”, symbolising Romulus’ protection over Raimond and therefore the comfort and safety Raimond felt amongst his family. This idea is heightened as Gaita writes “I was nervous riding with Mitru...when I rode with my father, no matter how fast he drove, I always urged him to drive faster”. Through a clear contrast, Gaita clearly displays how belonging with family fosters a sense of security as Raimond exhibits a more secure familial link with his father. Gaita

However, Gaita also presents the result of failure to belong within the family unit through Raimond’s mother, Christine. The reader can understand that as a result of living in a foreign country and mild mental illness, Christine finds it particularly difficult to develop an identity, especially within her own family. Gaita uses an accumulative description of Christine as “alone, small, frail” to convey Christine’s isolation and suggest reason for why “she did not care properly for me, and/her careless spending undermined his capacity to do so”. This isolation is furthered as Gaita “felt awkward with her”/“The pathos of it embarrassed and saddened me.” Using a poignant tone to represent detachment, Gaita highlights how one’s inability to belong to family results negatively not only on that individual, but those whom they surround.

Perkins uses the family unit in *One Night the Moon* to not only explore the close relationships that emerge within a family, but also suggest social barriers which obstruct families from connecting to others.

This idea is represented clearest through the opening scene in which the Anglo Australian family ride dominantly alongside the Aboriginal family. As the Anglo father, Jim, shields his daughter Emily, Perkins expresses the safety and protection that this family appears to have. Similarly, the close up of the Aboriginal parents Albert and Rose holding their child’s hand further emphasises the closeness and comfort found within the family unit. Perkins also uses this scene however, to highlight the strong tension and conflict within Anglo and Aboriginal Australian families at the time. Through a high angle shot, the audience see the Ryan’s riding domineeringly beside the Yang’s who walk. The juxtaposition of the two suggests the strong divide between not only the two families, but between the two races. Through the comparison of the identical family structure in both Anglo and Aboriginal family, this divide is strengthened as despite similar structures, ultimately, only the Aboriginal family will stay intact, hinting at the arrogance of the Anglo family.

Gaita suggests belonging to place and landscape as another significant aspect in developing and shaping ones sense of identity. Gaita also conveys the suffering one endures when they are unable to belong to a particular place. On arrival to Australia Romulus experiences a lack of connection with his new home which prevents the establishment of his Australian identity. Romulus’ alienation from the Australian landscape is represented through the juxtaposition of the descriptive words, “beauty,” and, “desolate,” which are contrasted in the reflection, “though the landscape is one of rare beauty, to a European or English eye it seems desolate, and even after more than forty years my father could not become reconciled to it.” “Desolate,” carries connotations of hostility and isolation which is reflective of Romulus’ lack of connection and therefore lack of belonging to Australia, while, “beauty,” is representative of Raimond’s future relation to the landscape as a result

of his developing identity. Similar to Romulus' rejection of the land, Gaita highlights Christine's isolation as a result of living in a foreign land through the line "A dead red gum stood only a hundred metres from the house and became for my mother a symbol of her desolation." Here, Gaita not only portrays the lack of connection faced by Romulus and Christine, but suggests the disconnectedness felt overall by new migrants.

Raimond's own perspective of belonging to the landscape is juxtaposed with Romulus' and Christine's when he first realised the beauty of the landscape and "Possessed of that key, my perception of the landscape changed radically as when one sees the second image in an ambiguous drawing." Through the use of a simile Gaita details Raimond's spiritually changing perception as he realises his strong sense of identity in the landscape of the landscape and that of rural Victoria, indicating his altering desire to belong to the Victorian landscape. Gaita identifies "Primitive though the house was...it offered the hope that our family might be reunited." Gaita symbolically represents Frogmore as a place of hope for Raimond to connect with his family, reflecting the desire to embrace a sense of family within the place he lives.

Belonging to place is significantly explored in *One Night the Moon* through Jim's failure to belong, which results in the death of his child, and Albert's strong connection with the land, which leads to the beginning of reconciliation.

The extreme close up of Jim's house symbolises his attitude that he has full ownership over the land. This point is reinforced as Jim sings with high modality, "this land is mine, they won't take it away from me". The motif of the high pitched music as Jim continues to search for his daughter throughout the film, reluctant of Albert's help, highlights disjunction suggesting the land will not give in because he wants to conquer it. As Jim, defeated, walks out into the open landscape the pale hues signify his separation to the land as the screen darkens coupled the sound of a gunshot. Ultimately, Jim's inability to accept his disconnection to the land leads to the death not only of his child, but also himself.

Albert's connection to the land consequently allows for the beginning of a new relationship between Anglos and Aboriginals. Albert sings, "This land is me, this land owns me" symbolising the grace he has with the land and his symbiotic relationship with it as a result of his Aboriginal Spirituality. The focus on Albert's concerned faces as he sings, "beyond the known we're not alone" suggests him wanting the Anglos to open their mind to otherness, furthering his trust in metaphysical existence as the land is his spiritual guide. Albert's deep ties with the land are heightened through the repetition of time lapse cinematography showing the many stages of the moon, Albert is aware that time is passing and the chances of Emily being alive is little, not only furthers his profound understanding of the land, but also his compassion for the White settler despite his ill treatment. Eventually, Albert's relationship with the land allows him to find her body. Through the overhead shot of Albert holding Emily as they stand in barren land, Perkins suggests, despite Albert's success, men and women are insignificant and must work together to take on bigger issues than race.

Relationships prove to be an enormous source of growth in *Romulus, My Father*. This growth enables a stable identity and one's established belonging, however Gaita also portrays the result of having inadequate relationships.

Strong connections are built through relationships seen particularly between Raimond and a family friend called Hora and his teacher, Mottek. Gaita reflects, "I know what a good workman is; an honest man is; friendship is; I know because I remember these things in the person of my father, in the person of his friend Hora, and in the example of their friendship." This cumulative list of traits and values is representative of the significance of relationships in the development of a positive personality and sense of belonging.

Gaita demonstrates the idea that mental illness can cause a barrier to the growth and development of relationships, and therefore cause a barrier to belonging. Mental illness first occurs within

Christine. Christine's relationship with Romulus is described as "intense and fraught" with these two descriptive words holding connotations of negative emotion and being reflective of the instability of their connection, which is a result of Christine's own insecurity. As her illness grows over time, it becomes a symbolic representation of the growing distance between herself and her family. When Raimond is born, Gaita explains that Christine "seemed incapable of taking care of me, ignoring my elementary needs of feeding and bathing." The descriptive word, "incapable," and the verb, "ignoring," display the extremity of her mental illness and its significance to her lack of belonging by representing the insurmountable barrier to belonging that comes about when the filial bond between mother and child is not consummated. The adverb, "elementary," and the verbs, "feeding," and "bathing" emphasise the helplessness of an infant and further exemplify the depth of Christine's internal turmoil due to her lack of motherly intuition. These consequences prevent the growth of relationships, which hinders ideas of connection and togetherness, and therefore causes a lack of belonging.

Perkins explores in *One Night the Moon* the unenduring relationships that are a result of failure to communicate and comfort, while also stressing the need for reconciliation in order to move forward. Jim and Roses' failure to communicate throughout the absence of their child results in Jim drinking in the corner, looking down in the shadows, contrasted to him once dominating the land. Perkins suggests that his failure to fit the masculine culture to provide and protect results in disappointment as he could not do either, resulting in the breakdown of the couple's relationship. Perkins uses intertextuality of Max Dupain's image, *Sunbaker*, which represents the quintessential Australian man, powerful, athletic and strong. By subverting the image, Perkins shows a broken and defeated man that is Jim. His enduring symbol of masculinity and patriarchal values are all subverted, emphasised as he sings "I don't know anything" suggesting the loss of his identity and all relationships he once knew. The cut to a black screen shows his void and lack of meaning, ultimately suicides – reinforced through the eerie music and dull hues.

Reconciliation is a strong theme in *One Night the Moon* symbolised through the extreme close up of the black and white hands coming together suggesting that unity is the only way that they can solve any problem. This point is reinforced as eventually, Rose goes to Albert with a shared understanding developed through her suffering. The close up of his arm on her shoulder to which she does not react highlights her acceptance of the Aborigines and understanding her need for his help. "