



GENERAL COMMENTS

A number of excellent responses, written on a wide range of texts, showed that students understood well the demands of the task in the 2010 Literature examination. They engaged closely with the passages to produce writing that was well conceived and analytical in its intent. Fewer students this year attempted only one response and there were far fewer very short essays.

Examination responses were assessed holistically, using the examination assessment criteria and Qualities for the Mark Range as published on the VCAA website.

The two major concerns this year were some students' inability to analyse and respond to the language of the passages, and that too many students did not base their response on one or more of the set passages as the question required. Some essays were based around the students' interpretation of the text and included only one or two, often quite minor, references to the passages to support their ideas. In this case the passages were used as a stimulus to recount the narrative or for a general commentary on the text. Ideally, the task should be approached the other way around – the interpretation should be drawn from a close analysis of the passages. The passage(s) must be the focus of the essay.

In high-scoring responses it was clear at the start of the essay how the student would develop the essay, using the passages as a starting point and indicating the interpretation. The following five examples of opening paragraphs demonstrate this.

Hamlet's speech in Passage 1 to the attendant surveillants Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is representative of the notion of duality that pervades all three passages. It is in its construction paradoxical in nature, containing the gravitas of Hamlet's metaphysical discourses also present in his soliloquies throughout the play, while maintaining the infinitely deregulated style of prose.

Katherine Mansfield once said 'Life never bores me' and this sense of fascination at life is conveyed in her short stories. Indeed, Mansfield values the richness of all experience, both the bright and the lightly sensual, such as the abundant life emanating from the pear tree in 'Bliss' and the more grotesque and unsettling details revealed in 'The Garden Party' and 'The Woman at the Store'.

The human struggles within 'A Passage to India' are framed within the context of universal meaninglessness and chaos. It is within this setting that English and Indian hostilities become trivial. However, through the inherent goodwill of characters such as Mrs Moore and Aziz, Forster conveys that although the 'two nations' cannot be united, 'not yet', it leaves the possibility of such a union occurring.

Mary Shelley, in these three passages from her novel, 'Frankenstein', demonstrates the destruction of both her protagonist, Victor, and his creation, albeit a gradual destruction. Additionally, in her first passage, Victor's sublimated sexual drives and desires are hinted at. The second and third passages detail both the creature's and Victor's struggle to grapple with their respective situations. It is therefore possible to draw out Shelley's critique of the inextricable link between progress-driven, enlightened desires and passionate enthusiasm, a trait much revered by Romantic scholars. Moreover, Shelley's is a feminist critique - a warning against following one's sublimated desires beyond the 'domestic sphere'.

Both passages 1 and 2 underscore the notion of ambiguity and confusion that stems from a lack of clarity in thought and speech. In contrast to these earlier is passage 3, whereby Emma and Jane both reveal and unravel the deeply running indifference toward one another in an epiphanic moment.

The following openings are from lower-scoring responses. They are examples of how a response can be limited by focusing on a theme, character or plot as a starting point, instead of focusing on the passages.

William Shakespeare's epic tragedy 'Hamlet' features death, madness and betrayal. Throughout the play 'Hamlet the Dane' is subjected to the grief of all three.

William Shakespeare's 'Hamlet' explores aspects and themes of death, grief, religion and madness. These themes are found throughout the play and are linked through dialogue and soliloquies.

Emma Woodhouse although clever and witty, is conveyed though Austen's novel as self-centred and to quite often act without thinking. However, all turns out happily in the end.

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This study requires students to work closely with the text and to offer a detailed analysis. Students should be able to show a genuine and substantiated interaction with the text and evidence of close reading. They need to be concerned with the language and construction of the text, as well as with what the text is about. The following six extracts are examples of students showing their ability to work closely with the language of the text and to demonstrate analytical skills.

Creon's final speech rhythms evidence his loss of assured arrogance and power as a ruler. They no longer show the voluble pontification of a confident ruler, but the broken, disjointed diction of panic and despair.

This broken style of composition leads to a disjointed reading of the poem, perhaps reflecting the way Larkin viewed the world; as a place not of perfectly rounded events and individuals, but as a disjointed realm of overlapping and disconnected lives and emotions, where time glamorises our past perceptions and everything we do is nullified by the knowledge of our inescapable fate.

'Milton' opens with incandescent, lyrical imagery where 'holy' images of 'God' and very natural imagery of 'mountains green' and 'pleasant pastures' appear to harmonise in the portrayal of beauty and serenity. However, the imagery darkens as we sense concealment through 'the clouded hills', suggestive of an unknown and fearsome presence...Through the powerful imagery and lyrical imagery of the speaker's 'bow of burning gold' and 'arrows of desire' Blake presents this 'mental fight' as a passionate, unrelenting war.

Crab's wit reveals the slipperiness of language. 'I'll put my arm around your waist' is transformed into 'I'll put my armour round your waist', so much more sinister, as is the shift from 'sea kelp' to 'seek help'.

Yet like March beneath the waves Mrs Hepburn shall forever remain the 'black cap' sentenced to live and die within her cage 'dead-alive'. The vulgarity of her character demonstrates Lawrence's contempt for the middle classes ('how beastly the bourgeois is') and her superficial nature 'her trinkets, her furs, her furniture' furthermore demonstrates her disconnection from the natural world, which Lawrence held so dear.

[in relation to 'the Garden Party'] The belief that they 'had no right to be in that neighbourhood at all' suggests that the Sheridans are self-absorbed and ridiculously selfish, yet while their description of the town is cruel, it creates an image of life and movement. The 'cabbage stalks' 'sick hens' and 'tomato cans' create a sense of absence, pain and loss which contribute to this 'poverty stricken' town. The 'little rags and shreds' of smoke, juxtaposed with the Sheridan's 'plumes' evokes a stark image of shredding, disintegrating life underscoring the desperate struggle to survive.

Generally, most students were able to integrate their discussion of the views and values of the text into their response. The following example shows this well.

The overly emotional and judgemental women of the Club in Chandrapore are subjected to ridicule by Forster with their outrageous personalities and their adoption of a herd mentality. The ease with which the British reject the educated Indians presents a pessimistic outlook for the achievement of any unity and sense of 'oneness' between the two peoples.

Other concerns were the limited vocabulary of many students, their inability to use quotations correctly and problems with the use and reading of punctuation. While some words were clearly incorrect, some students used pretentious, convoluted language which at times failed to make any sense. Sometimes students hoped to make their writing more complex by using such language but often this had the opposite effect. Teachers should help students to compile a vocabulary suited to the task and the text. Similarly, students used quotations which were not illustrative in any way. Students have been taught to integrate quotations seamlessly into their writing but in so doing they must ensure that a particular point is being illuminated and supported.

Most students were able to offer an interpretation but some interpretations could not be supported from the text.

Posing a question at the start of the essay is to be avoided as the essay usually ends up reading like an English essay and tends to ignore the passages. There were fewer students this year who wrote about the lives of the authors at length, although the love life of Keats and his battle with consumption were favourite topics.

SPECIFIC INFORMATION

Essay 1

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	Average
%	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	3	4	4	6	8	12	14	15	11	9	5	4	2	1	12.9



Essay 2

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	Average
%	1	0	0	1	1	2	2	3	4	5	6	9	11	12	13	10	8	5	3	2	1	12.3

Novels

There were excellent responses on all of the novels and it was pleasing to see that all the texts had been used, although there were fewer essays on *Bleak House*, *The Death of Napoleon*, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *Sixty Lights*. *Frankenstein* gave rise to some very good responses and to some very sophisticated readings. *Emma* was again a popular choice and the selected passages enabled the development of a reading based on the heroine's growing maturity. More use could have been made of the language and particularly of the comic elements in this text. Some excellent essays were produced on *A Passage to India* and many students chose to focus on the second passage, set in the caves, which gave them a chance to develop a more complex reading. Students writing on *Regeneration* were sometimes a little unsure of how to connect the passages and these essays sometimes lacked coherence. Responses on *Atonement* were of a mixed standard. This is a challenging novel and some students were confused by the first person and third person narrations, and, in some cases, by what had 'actually' happened. There was plenty in the first passage for students to analyse, but too many students seemed to focus instead on the story. There were, however, some very good answers.

Plays

Hamlet was by far the most popular choice and the quality of the responses varied. Too many students seemed determined to write on a particular aspect and accordingly did not pay sufficient attention to the passages. Many wanted to discuss corruption, poison or madness but they needed to use the given passages to do so. *Hedda Gabler* and *Antigone* were also popular and in general both were well handled. The second *Antigone* passage offered students the chance to discuss the role and language of the chorus. It was pleasing to see an awareness of *Hedda Gabler* as theatre. There were only a few responses on the other play texts, with *Much Ado About Nothing* being the most popular, often giving rise to some spirited discussion of the plight of Hero in the play, and to some good language analysis. The few essays on *Copenhagen* were excellent. *No Sugar* seemed accessible to weaker students but there were some good responses.

Short Stories

Students wrote particularly well on the D H Lawrence stories. Students moved comfortably within and between the passages, discussing the language and the views and values of the text. There were some high-scoring responses to the Mansfield stories; however, students perhaps need to see that Mansfield valued the rich range of human experiences rather than looking to find any obvious links between the stories. There were not many answers on the Chekhov stories, but students often needed to look below the superficial reading to the despair and poverty in the stories.

Other Literature

By far the most popular choice was *This Boy's Life*, an accessible text that gave rise to a range of responses. The passages allowed for several different approaches. The idea of pretence ran through all three passages and many students related this to the adoption of masks. Toby's relationship with his Mother, as well as with Dwight, could be explored. There were many fewer essays on *Stasiland* this year and, although the passages did allow for plenty of language analysis and discussion of values, students did not always make full use of the opportunities offered. A very common misreading was in Passage 2, where the Major introduces himself as 'N., Major'. Almost all students continued to refer to this character as N Major or even as Mr Major.

Poetry

On the whole, the poetry questions were well handled. Although there were fewer responses to the Beveridge poems than in previous years, students who chose this text did well. The selection of passages, one from each of the three sections, enabled the students to comment on the poetry as a whole. There were some excellent answers on the Harwood poems; students were able to discuss Harwood's common concerns but also to show the range in her poetry. The answers on Larkin's poetry were often excellent. There was some very good analysis of language and successful students were able to elicit Larkin's values and ideas from the given passages. Students were able to show a wider knowledge of the body of work studied. While this is not obligatory, where a student was able to illustrate a point by so doing, this was all to the good. A mere listing of other poems, however, achieves little and the focus of study should be on the given passages. Many students struggled with the Blake poems. Students are advised to look closely at the language of the poems, at the rhythms and imagery, and to interpret meaning from the poems rather than provide a fixed



interpretation. Students generally wrote well on the Keats passages. There were few answers on Heaney's translation of *Beowulf*; in some of these there was a tendency to focus on the story at the expense of the poetry.

Student responses

Following are three complete responses. The first two met all the criteria at a very high level. The third response, while it lacks some of the complexity and thoroughness of the first two and does a little less close reading, addresses the criteria at a high level.

Student example 1

Nominated text: *Frankenstein*

Mary Shelley's Frankenstein impresses upon readers the importance of understanding and morality underpinning the acquisition of knowledge with regards to the power of nature. It is a lack of this understanding which ultimately propels Victor Frankenstein towards his terrible destruction. Representative of the superficiality and inherent lack of morality of society as a whole, Victor fails to realise that his true crime is not affording his creature life, but rather abandoning him. Shelley suggests that a society which is superficial, patriarchal and repressive will ultimately be to the detriment of all creatures and creator alike. The creature's fall from benevolence is a testament both to the terrible power of unbridled knowledge and the dark fate of a superficial society lacking compassion.

The power of nature is reflected in the hungry eyes of Victor Frankenstein as he 'witness(es)' a 'terrible thunderstorm'. The storm foreshadows that which is created by Victor's obsessive acquisition of knowledge and animation of his 'hideous progeny'. The devastating simplicity of his account of the storm to Walton speaks of a respect for a power which could 'utterly' destroy. Shelley's use of the word 'utterly' denotes a finality which implies to readers that nature and thus knowledge are powers greater than the human mind alone. However with the benefit of retrospect, Victor speaks of the 'slight ligaments' of which the human soul is constructed, an allusion to a fledgling understanding of the insignificance of the individual in comparison with the entirety of knowledge and the destructive power of nature. The reverent tone of Victor's reflection on his fateful encounter with the 'storm' eerily parallels the creature's wonder and pain as he roams the woods in a return to nature.

However through his acquaintance with nature the monster also gleans knowledge first of his world and subsequently of a society in which even the 'unprejudiced' cannot accept him. The moral failings of this society are showcased by Shelley in Victor's altercation with a 'benevolent' old magistrate. Shelley's words gain a satirical edge when Victor refers to his creature as a 'beast of prey' to be slaughtered accordingly. This is due to his own desire to hunt an 'animal' which only entered the world evil in his father's eyes. The insistent repetition of the word 'crimes' is a subtle allusion to the crime which shadows and underpins the life of the creature, his 'father's' abandonment of him. The true nature of the evil deeds of the creature cannot truly be classed as a 'crime' for he cannot truly be subject to the moral or legal law of a society with no place for him.

It is knowledge, not underpinned by understanding, which drives the snatching of his 'first victim'. Stripped of his benevolence by the cruelty of humans, the creature himself becomes a force of nature for 'utter destruction'. As the creature takes the life of William, Shelley emphasises his humanness, the 'heart' and 'hands' rendering his 'hellish triumph' all the more shocking. However, she is also careful to impress upon readers the superficial nature of the patriarchal society which has completely rejected the monster. The portrait of the 'most lovely woman' is a subtle reference to the values held by the society Shelley beheld around her. The monster educated by nature and civilised by society, notices the ultimate female attribute of beauty which further speaks of fragility and subservience. Shelley's selection of a suddenly gentler vocabulary, from the 'softened' creature to the 'lovely lips' and 'deep lashes' speaks of a feminine ideal representative of a society at large which values the beautiful and shuns all else. This is of course a role that the creature, for all his 'heart' and 'hands' can never hope to occupy.

The 'rage' in Victor's eyes at the deeds of the monster speaks of an emotional and intellectual blindness to the humanity of the creature he has created. It also parallels the 'rage' of the creature in beholding the beautiful woman who represents all that he himself lacks. Both creature and creator learn without understanding and at times behave without morality. The deaths which result as the joint product of their actions are a testament to the unequivocal destruction rendered when knowledge without understanding is coupled with a rigid society, lacking in compassion. The 'peopled earth' which rejects the creature is in a sense responsible for the needless deaths which follow, a desperate stampede 'bound' for 'ruin', sparked by the 'destiny' of the 'fifteen' year old boy who beheld a storm and failed to realise what this truly meant. Shelley's use of the word 'earth' encourages the reader to consider nature, knowledge and society as a whole, irrevocably bound, intrinsically linked to the 'destiny' of the individual.

The moral failings of society as a whole are inherent in Victor as a character. As the Magistrate refers to the creature as an 'animal', the word grates against Victor's insistent reference to him as a 'fiend' or later a 'beast of prey'. This reflects a failing to see any humanity in a creature whom he himself afforded the brain and 'heart' of a human. In a wider sense this is of course Shelley's allusion to the superficiality of society, Victor flees from his 'progeny' at the sight of him animated and terrible. The 'curiosity and delight' he had felt having evaporated, Victor lacks the morality to anchor him at his creatures' side and take responsibility for him. At this point Victor's own childishness is showcased, the word 'delight' evoking in reader's minds the ethereal romanticism with which the scientist describes his childhood. At fifteen, it is with the 'curiosity and delight' that Victor views the power of nature.



Victor acknowledges that it is his lot to have 'turned' the creature 'loose upon society'. However, the inference of his use of the word 'upon' is that the creature was from his own perverse birth a monster and a danger to society. This speaks of Victor's persistent failure to realise that the creature began his life amoral. His 'wrongdoing' in fact began with his rejection having been set in motion by his civilisation. Unguided, he gains knowledge of society not underpinned by understanding of its true evils. Had he gleaned this understanding through guidance of the benevolent creator he longs for, his 'destiny' might have been different. However, Victor is concerned with his own 'utter and terrible destruction'. The finality of this assertion reflects a complete unawareness of the possibility of moral redemption through the laying aside of 'rage' and the implementation of compassion.

However, Victor remains to the last blinkered by the society to which he both belongs and on a metaphorical level represents. Thus, Shelley advocated that because of the infinite destructive power of nature and knowledge alike, typified by the 'ribbons of wood', morality and compassion can be the only refuge of the individual. To ignore this, she alleges, is to be engulfed in the same tide of passion and broken dreams that sweeps away Victor and his creation.

Student example 2

Nominated text: *The Major Works* – John Keats

Keats's poetry conveys his value of the mind, and its capacity to create new imaginative realms. He views the poem as a construct, an essentially creative space within which one can brood over and contemplate art, literature and the expansive possibilities of our imaginations. Through the 'viewless wings of poesy' which Keats recognises in 'Ode to a Nightingale', he explores his predominant values and concerns; 'western islands' of literature, in 'On first Looking at Chapman's Horner', and the joys and utter pain created through the concept of permanence; the lover in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' may be 'near the goal', yet he 'hast not thy bliss'. Of course, Keats values the inextricable link between pleasure and pain or death; his poetry is infused with images which frequently underscore this nature of experience, and yet through his elevated tones, Keats transcends the pains of desire.

In 'Bright Star' the speaker conveys his longing for permanence, through his celebration of the star's 'steadfast' qualities. The image of being 'hung aloft' in the 'night' resonates a sense of lofty pleasure as this image of suspension alludes to transcendence. Yet the phrase 'lone splendour' mixes feelings of joy and loneliness, illustrating Keats's assertion of the manner in which the two seem to be inevitably wedded. Indeed, the image of 'eternal lids apart' sounds unnatural, even torturous, and thus the speaker presents a bittersweet image; despite lovingly watching over the earth, the star will remain 'sleepless', 'like nature's patient sleepless Erermite', a hermit or recluse, eternally committed to its role of perfection. The idea of 'pure ablution', with its calming assonance, creates a sense of purity, cleansing and rejuvenation associated with this 'priest like task'. Yet whilst the star burns in space, the speaker realises he cannot be so distant from his lover; whilst the octet of the sonnet enunciates aspirations for permanence beyond that which is human, the sestet shifts to the loving, gently sexual image of being 'pillow'd' upon the speaker's 'fair love's ripening breast.' This idea of 'ripening' reminds one of the 'joy's grape' in 'Ode on a Melancholy' and the luscious fulfilment such ripeness and lushness creates. The full 'l' sounds of the alliterative 'soft swell and fall' convey the motion of human breathing, and creating a sense of full, voluptuous fecundity as the rhythmic motions of human breathing and the 'earth's human shores' link the octet and sestet, creating a sense of overwhelming connection. The word 'still' illustrates Keats's use of puns; whilst the speaker wants to remain for ever in this highly aroused 'sweet unrest', he also wants to remain 'still', so as to fully appreciate the momentous sensuality of 'tender-taken breath'. The breathy alliteration of 'tender-taken' physically constrains the reader, alluding thus to the idea that such relentless sensuality will ultimately be connected with pain. The speaker outlines clear alternatives to 'live for ever or else swoon to death'. The double 'o' sound in 'swoon' creates a feeling of enticing luxuriousness, yet simultaneously a sense of finality. Indeed, it reminds one of 'Ode to a Nightingale' when the speaker says 'now more than ever it seems rich to die'; in such a manner Keats emphasises his value of the link between sexual swooning and death. Similarly to the luscious fulfilment the grape offers, the swooning will be followed by pain and a subsiding of passion. Yet this is what Keats suggests makes the experience of pleasure so ultimately ravishing.

Similarly to his discussion of permanence in 'Bright Star', in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' Keats confronts the difference between the idealised realm of the aesthetic, and the more vulnerable temporal underpinnings, of lived human experience. Keats's use of 'still' is similarly a pun in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'; used like the conjunction 'yet' it alludes to the idea that the marriage will never be consummated as the urn and its characters will always remain 'still', thus an 'unravish'd bride'. The speaker questions the urn; 'what maidens loth? What struggle to escape? What wild ecstasy?' Immediately a sense of irony is implied, as of course, the urn, being a 'foster-child of silence' cannot answer. The Greek word from which 'ecstasy' originated literally meant 'to be out of place'; therefore it seems the 'maidens overwrought' might be 'beside themselves', and alarmed and fearful, rather than experiencing the joy which the word 'ecstasy' usually implies. The speaker claims 'unheard' melodies are 'sweeter', moving the poem to a more abstract and intellectual level, commenting on Keats's value of the imagination creating the ultimate sense of satisfaction. Yet he then notices the painful, almost torturous nature of permanence; the compensation, that 'forever wilt thou love, and she be fair' seems inconsequential considering that 'bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss'. The repetition of 'never' creates a sense of overabundant regret and longing. 'More happy, happy love' will constantly be revealed, yet this bouncing rhythm creates a sense of energy which the urn truly lacks: The budding power of the moment just before full flowering frequently seems to interest Keats; in 'Ode to Psyche' Cupid and Psyche will wake with 'Kisses to outnumber', a celebration of their passionate love. Yet in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' the speaker realises that love 'forever warm' and 'panting' cannot fulfil, as does passion which 'leaves a heart high- sorrowful and cloy'd'. This 'cloy'd' sensation is valued over the intense desire of the 'bold lover'. The urn 'dost tease us out of thought'; Keats's use of 'tease' translates the abstract into the almost palpable as he places human traits upon the urn. The gnomic utterance 'Beauty is truth, truth is beauty' suggests that Keats values the aesthetic



over all else, and that if the urn will not yield up its truths, we must be satisfied with the abstraction of beauty. Indeed, whilst the 'truths' of our lives pass, beauty created by the imagination is timeless; in such a manner Keats conveys his value for the mind's capacity to create.

Similarly, in 'On First Looking at Chapman's Homer,' the controlled lines illustrate an experience of the sublime, as Keats celebrates the expansive realm of the mind, and the fruition of our imaginations; literature. Nature is used as an extended metaphor to compare the human experience of reading literature. Indeed, the idea of 'realms', 'states' and 'kingdoms' being 'gold' and 'goodly' evokes images of the discovery of a magical, sparkling new world; wealthy, but of the mind. The 'wide expanse' of Homer's 'demesne' alludes to the expansive world of literature and its capacity to broaden one's mind and experience, similar to travelling and adventure. The double adjective 'pure serene' contributes to the celebratory, elevated sense of the sonnet, underscoring the wonder of Chapman's translation of Homer. As the sonnet moves from a state of conscious narration to pure sensation. 'Then felt I like some watcher of the skies/ When a new planet swims into his ken'. Like an astronomer discovering another star in the infinite sky, the speaker has discovered another gem in the world of literature. He compares this moment to the discovery of the Pacific Ocean. There is a sense of haughty pleasure conveyed as 'stout Cortez' and 'all his men', rampant masculinity, were 'silent', enraptured by their encounter. The mouthstretching 'o' and 'ou' sounds in words like 'gold' 'round' 'loud' and 'bold' may be held in the cheek by the repeated 'd' consonant, but the elongated vowels in 'skies', 'eyes' and 'surmise' illustrate the broadening expansive capacity of our minds and literature, which Keats intrinsically values.

Keats's poetry celebrates the power of the imagination to create and sustain realms of pure beauty and indulgence, valuing the 'teeming brain' recognised in 'When I have fears that I may cease to be' for its inherent ability to contemplate Keats's predominate concerns. Whilst permanence is questioned, and illustrated to be undoubtedly imperfect in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', the link between sensual, heightened pleasure and pain permeates the paradoxes and puns in Keats's poetry. While perhaps the love is 'still to be enjoy'd', the lovers' anguished experience of desire will be eternally and riddingly painful.

Student example 3

Nominated text: *This Boy's Life*

Through *This Boy's Life*, Tobias Wolff explores the desperate search for happiness and acceptance. Toby's search for acceptance in a life in which he feels 'mired in pretence' is indicative of a low self-esteem which makes him afraid to show his true self. His and Rosemary's story is one of a restless desire to find a place where they belong within society's expectations, which only seem to hinder their happiness.

Toby and Rosemary's attempt to build a family with the intolerable Dwight reflects an adherence to notions of family perpetuated by a 1950s society. The idea of the 'nuclear family' as promoted in the media – TV, advertisements – and as such is the centre of their ambitions. In Passage 1, the sacrifices Rosemary makes to provide Toby with a 'normal' home life are apparent – 'Marrying Dwight meant quitting her job, giving up the house' – in this way, it is clear that having a family in which they could settle is very important to Rosemary, even though 'she didn't respect [Dwight]'. Toby also seems to place a great amount of value on the idea of belonging to a 'family', as even though he is extremely unhappy with Dwight, he would tell Rosemary otherwise, 'aghast at [his] own falsity yet somehow powerless to stop it'. While Rosemary's willingness to marry Dwight is a result of some maternal instinct to protect Toby and provide him with a comfortable life, Toby's acceptance of the arrangement is indicative of his inability to accept himself for who he is, and his subsequent search for a way in which to define himself 'by opposition to [Dwight]'.

Throughout the memoir, Toby is seen to conform to restrictive ideas of masculinity, which include fighting, overt and vulgar sexuality and rejection of male femininity. In passage two, Toby's insecurity in regards to his own masculinity is apparent, as he acknowledges that 'only one of [Dwight's] charges' – among which were 'liar' and 'thief' – 'had stringing power – that I was a sissy'. Through this admission, Wolff conveys the high importance which Toby places on being an 'alpha-male' type; that he would rather concede to such damning accusations as lying and thievery than be considered less than what a man 'should be'. Toby likes Arthur for a number of reasons – 'his sharp, acid wit... his apparent indifference to what people thought of him' – these are qualities which Toby himself would like to possess. However, due to the significant effect which other people's opinions have on his sense of self, Toby denounces Arthur to others as a 'sissy' 'to put himself in the clear' of similar accusations. While Toby is depicted as relatively incompetent where physical fighting is concerned, his admission that he habitually 'got in fights' comes as no surprise. This behaviour is a defense mechanism by which he maintains the façade which allows him to fulfill the restrictive notion of manhood which is perpetuated by the society of the time. There is a tension which exists in Toby, however, between his need to 'fit in' with perceived expectations and his hidden desire to be a genuinely 'good' person.

Beyond Toby's 'outlaw' tendencies and alpha-male posturing, it is apparent that he wishes to simply reveal his true self, and to be 'good'. We see that Toby places value on virtue through his admiration of his mother. 'She made the world feel friendly', he says in a tone of glowing reverence for the woman who made his life worth living, throughout all its hardships. Even when Rosemary tells Toby he can 'forget about it' when she tells him that Dwight spent his paper route money, Toby can recognise her good intentions; that 'she'd wanted us all to get along.' Through Toby's admiration of his mother, we can see where his true values lie; he wants to be a good person, but his desire to conform to the expectations of his peers leads him astray. Elsewhere in the memoir, we can see that Toby desperately wants to live his life in the way he considers right, as he hides in the house from a nun, ashamed of himself (for playing with his rifle as he 'feared her incomprehension').

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The nun symbolises a noble way of life, while Toby and his rifle are indicative of his 'sins'. While Toby harbours the innate inclination to do right, his desire to fulfil the notions of being 'cool' and being a man lead him towards wrongdoings.

The desire to find belonging and happiness in this world is clear within This Boy's Life. Rosemary and Toby, alone and optimistic, are happier than they could ever be with Dwight, however they feel the need to live the life that society tells them is acceptable. Toby knows the way he lives is wrong, yet he continues to perpetuate his 'outlaw' image. By conforming to the expectations of society, Toby and Rosemary sacrifice their own happiness in order to 'assume a pose'.