

# UNIT 17

## *Romulus, My Father*

by Raimond Gaita

### THE EXCELLENT ESSAY



An excellent text response essay about Raimond Gaita's *Romulus, My Father* reflects most of the following top-range grade descriptor qualities as specified in the *VCE English / English as a Second Language Assessment Handbook: 2008–2011* for Unit 4, Outcome 1:

**41–50 marks:** A highly-developed and well-sustained interpretation of a selected text supported by the considered selection and use of highly appropriate textual evidence. Thorough and insightful understanding of the ideas, characters and themes constructed and presented in the selected text. Complex discussion and critical analysis of the ways in which the author constructs meaning and expresses or implies a point of view and values. Highly appropriate use of relevant metalanguage to support analysis. Highly expressive, fluent and coherent writing.

### SAMPLE TOPIC

'... a woman read my father's future in her cards ... She said he was destined for a journey across a large water, that he would lose his wife and suffer greatly.' To what extent does *Romulus, My Father* demonstrate how individuals deal with unrelenting suffering?

#### Content features

#### Excellent essay

#### Expression and mechanics features

- 1 Author and text introduced in a general comment about key concept.
- 2 The quote in the topic is explained in context.
- 3 Clear contention on the topic.
- 4 Overview of key text details.
- 5 Main contention elaborated in this section.
- 6 Main contention qualified here to incorporate broader discussion of text.

In *Romulus, My Father*, (1) Raimond Gaita signifies his central exploration of the inevitable universal experience of human suffering by placing the recount (2) of the fortune teller's prophetic declaration that Romulus Gaita would undertake a journey then 'lose his wife and suffer greatly' at the end of Chapter One. (1) (2) Gaita's biographical text (3) explores how individuals respond to the pain they experience through adversity. (3) Throughout his life, Romulus suffered immense hardships – historical, political and economic upheavals, poverty, violence, unfulfilled dreams, dislocation, betrayal and mental illness. (4) (4) Despite the ongoing tragedies, Romulus's pains were assuaged by his personal integrity and moral resilience. His love for his son and his deep friendship with Hora provided strength to weather his unrelenting sufferings. (5) Although his childhood and adolescence were disrupted by hardships, Raimond's bond with his father helped him to survive the suffering and mature into a sensitive thinker. (5) Unfortunately, the text also shows that an inability to deal effectively with unmitigated suffering is ultimately destructive, as in the situation of Christine and Mitru. (6)

- 1 Correctly punctuated title.
- 2 Literary terminology – metalanguage.
- 3 Literary terminology – metalanguage.
- 4 Effective 'list' sentence.
- 5 Effective key concept vocabulary throughout introduction; including effective synonyms for key terms.
- 6 Clear topic sentence – links with topic and main contention.

**'... a woman read my father's future in her cards ... She said he was destined for a journey across a large water, that he would lose his wife and suffer greatly'. To what extent does *Romulus, My Father* demonstrate how individuals deal with unrelenting suffering?**

## Content features

- 7** In this paragraph the student contextualises and explains the concept of suffering from Romulus's perspective.
- 8** Student provides evidence and develops interpretation in relation to topic.
- 9** Student provides more evidence and develops interpretation in relation to topic.
- 10** Student discusses Romulus's early responses to suffering.
- 11** Effective and selective character interpretation in relation to the topic.
- 12** Student draws interpretation from evidence presented.
- 13** Insightful character interpretation relevant to topic.
- 14** In this paragraph the student explores further hardships and comments on how Romulus responds effectively.
- 15** Student links the landscape image to the concept of 'suffering' and develops an interpretation.
- 16** Effective use of character adjectives to offer character interpretation relevant to the topic.
- 17** Student presents interpretation, then evidence.

## Excellent essay

Romulus has an inherent understanding of the nature of human suffering, which enabled him to face up to his own difficult circumstances. **(6) 7** Gaita alludes **(7)** to a prayer in *The Book of Common Prayer* that he believes captures Romulus's 'sense of life': 'Man that is born of woman hath but a short time to live and is full of misery'. **(8)** By equating this with Romulus's outlook, the reader can construe his acceptance that suffering is a natural, but fleeting, element of human experience that in some way elevates the human spirit. **8** Gaita goes on to say, 'Those accents of sorrow and pity determined his sense of all other human beings as his fellow mortals, victims of fate and destined for suffering'. **(9)** Romulus's recognition that pain is part of being human enables him to feel kinship with others and express compassion and support during the sufferings of others depicted in the text. **9** His acceptance of suffering and his capacity to deal with it is put to the test from his early life to his final days. **(10) (11)**

Romulus's early life in Europe was overshadowed by much character-forming adversity. **10 (12)** He was raised by grandparents due to the disintegration of his own parents' life, he was subjected to violence, he was obliged to work at an early age and his education was incomplete. **(13)** Even through these difficulties the qualities that would sustain him in the course of later hardships were manifest – his love of learning, his respect for hard work, his sense of duty to family and his interest in the metaphysical and moral. **11 12** Gaita recounts the extreme self-sacrificing lengths **13** Romulus would take to ensure his family was provided for: 'He would walk up to eighty kilometres for a litre of milk ... Exhausted by his efforts to get food for us and because he denied himself so that I would have more'. **(14)** His ambitions were soured by the political upheavals in Europe and derailed by his new wife, Christine, who wanted to emigrate. Romulus left Europe unfulfilled and with a sense of trepidation about the future. **(15) (16)**

In the beginning, the dry and desolate landscape of country Victoria personified unrelieved human suffering for Romulus. **14** Trapped in menial labouring jobs in this hostile country compounded his feelings of loneliness, dislocation and frustration. **15** Christine's infidelities, her increasing instability and turbulent long affair with Mitru increased his alienation and grief. His shocking motorcycle accidents and, eventually, Lydia's betrayal pushed his limits. **(17)** Mental illness reduced him. Romulus's initiative and talents helped him alleviate the material hardships as he eventually set up his workshop and gained the esteem of his customers through his extraordinary hard work. **16** Gaita equates his father's belief in the restorative value of work to a quasi-spiritual experience: '... work brought my father again into spiritual equilibrium'. **(18)** However, **(19)** it was the depth of his relationships with others that gave him fortitude and some qualified joy in life despite the difficulties. Romulus took his role as a father seriously; perhaps he was too strict or too authoritarian at times. His dutiful and purposeful 'devoted care' of Raimond provided mutual consolation in difficult times – and he received unconditional love and respect from his son. The reciprocal loyalty of friendship 'through thick or thin' between Hora and Romulus was central for most of his life: 'I know what friendship is ... in the person of my father, in the person of his friend Hora, and in the example of their friendship'. **(20) 17** Romulus derived endurance from an unwavering belief in virtues such as absolute honesty, truth and compassion, which was fuelled through his discussions and friendship with Hora. Gaita recollects that, 'I had never known anyone who lived so passionately, as did these two

## Expression and mechanics features

- 7** Literary terminology – metalanguage.
- 8** Embedded quote effectively punctuated.
- 9** Embedded quote effectively punctuated.
- 10** Effective vocabulary used throughout this paragraph.
- 11** Concluding sentence links to topic.
- 12** Clear topic sentence.
- 13** Effective 'list' sentence summarises evidence for interpretation.
- 14** Embedded quote – correctly punctuated.
- 15** Effective vocabulary throughout.
- 16** Bridging style connective sentence.
- 17** There are several 'list' sentences giving a context for the student's interpretation.
- 18** Embedded quote – correctly punctuated.
- 19** Use of link words throughout paragraph to advance interpretation.
- 20** Embedded quote – correctly punctuated.

## Content features

## Excellent essay

## Expression and mechanics features

**18** In this paragraph the student discusses other characters and an alternative view.

**19** Effective evidence and character adjectives used.

**20** A key quote is used to develop an interpretation for each character.

**21** Conclusion reiterates main contention and summarises the ideas presented. Use of key vocabulary.

friends, the belief that nothing matters so much in life as to live it decently'. Romulus was able to rise above his suffering through the strength of his relationships and the power of his moral beliefs. **(21)**

Unfortunately, Christine and Mitru were destroyed by the pain of their suffering. **18 (22)** At the outset, the relationship caused much anguish for all because of the profound act of betrayal and the consequent alienation of family members. **19** Both Christine and Mitru multiplied their distress by their actions. Judged and ostracised by the conservative community, Christine's mental illness spiralled out of control and those that mattered 'did not appreciate the degree to which my mother's life and behaviour were affected by her psychological illness'. **20** Her suffering led to suicide. The disastrous relationship left Mitru alienated and profoundly unhappy. In reflecting on Mitru's suicide, Gaita says: 'In his own eyes Mitru was a wretched man . . . he felt guilty and humiliated. His wrong-doing was unredeemed, for it brought happiness to no one and much misery'. **20** The self-loathing and self-condemnation Mitru feels prohibited him from moving beyond his suffering and he succumbed to the desperation of suicide. **(23) (24)**

Raimond Gaita's exploration of his father's life centres on how Romulus responded to the many hardships he encountered. **21** The strength of Romulus's relationships with his son and Hora, as well as his own steadfast moral fibre, helped him to endure his suffering. Gaita also shows that those who cannot deal effectively with their difficulties end up compounding them. (1060 words)

**21** Summary-style concluding sentence.

**22** Clear topic sentence signals a shift in the argument, and links to the topic.

**23** Effective vocabulary and variety of link words used.

**24** Sentence sums up the character and key idea presented in the paragraph.

# THE SATISFACTORY ESSAY



A satisfactory text response essay about Raimond Gaita's *Romulus, My Father* reflects most of the following medium-range grade descriptor qualities as specified in the **VCE English / English as a Second Language Assessment Handbook: 2008–2011** for Unit 4, Outcome 1:

**21–30 marks:** A generally well-sustained interpretation of a selected text supported by textual evidence. Knowledge of the ideas, characters and themes constructed and presented in the selected text. Discussion and some analysis of the ways in which the author constructs meaning and expresses or implies a point of view and values. Use of mainly relevant metalanguage to support analysis. Generally expressive, fluent and coherent writing.

A satisfactory text response essay presents a mostly relevant response to the topic and also contains adequate content and adequate expression. An essay of this standard reads as though it is unfinished, or 'half-baked'.

Read the following sample satisfactory text response essay on *Romulus, My Father* and complete the tasks in order to improve the standard of the essay. Although the student shows knowledge of what happened in the text and a basic understanding of the topic, the response lacks detailed reference and interpretation. The topic sentences are inadequate, some expression is ambiguous and quotations are not correctly incorporated.

## SAMPLE TOPIC

**'How are the individuals in *Romulus, My Father* influenced by their experiences?'**

### Satisfactory essay

Raimond Gaita's autobiographical novel, *Romulus, My Father*, is set in rural Victoria during the 1950s and 1960s. The novel explores the themes of loyalty and betrayal, what it means to live a 'decent life' and the influences that shape an individual's identity. (1) All of the main characters in the story – Romulus, Raimond, Christine, Mitru and Hora – face some dramatic experiences that have strong effects on them. (2)

Romulus Gaita is the central character in this novel. (3) Romulus experiences much hardship in his life, which influences his personality and his values. During the early part of his life he experienced poverty, a harsh childhood, a limited education and the upheaval of World War 2. This influenced him to become hard-working, inventive and self-reliant. (4) He also showed a great sense of responsibility to his wife and young son. (5) These experiences also gave him a love of learning and intellectual discussion. (6) When he migrates to Australia with his young family, Romulus experiences many difficulties that shape his values. First, he has many issues about employment and isolation in the Australian countryside. Then, he has to face his wife's betrayal and her eventual suicide. He has two motorbike accidents and after he is betrayed by Lydia, he falls into mental illness. (7) All of these experiences help form his very high values about honesty, self-respect, compassion to others and the importance of work. (8) '...his unqualified sense of common humanity with everyone he met. His severe judgment often caused pain ... he never intentionally caused suffering to anyone. He was truly a man who would rather suffer evil than do it'. (9) Romulus is definitely influenced by his experiences. (10)

### Improvement tasks

- 1 Rewrite the first two sentences so that they effectively introduce the text and connect with the topic.
- 2 After you have read the essay, rewrite this sentence so that it accurately indicates what the student will be arguing in the essay.
- 3 Inappropriate topic sentence. Delete.
- 4 Give and interpret evidence.
- 5 Supply evidence.
- 6 Supply evidence.
- 7 Storytelling. Reduce this description of events into one concise sentence.
- 8 Develop a more detailed interpretation.
- 9 Is this quote appropriate to the topic? Delete or replace with another quote. Ensure that the quote is correctly punctuated as part of a sentence. Give interpretation of your quote.
- 10 Rewrite concluding sentence so that it sums up key ideas.

## Satisfactory essay

Raimond Gaita is the narrator of *Romulus, My Father*. (11) As he grows up, Raimond has many difficult experiences that help to form his character, but he also has some positive experiences that help him to develop his values and love of learning. During his childhood, Raimond experienced being neglected and abandoned by his mother, Christine. There was some disruption because of Romulus' employment issues. Also, Romulus was quite harsh with Raimond at times. Then, Raimond had to live through Christine's betrayal, insanity and suicide. Then, he had to live through his father's motorbike accidents, suicide attempts and mental illness. Raimond was very upset when his beloved dog was murdered. (12) Positive experiences that influenced Raimond were his relationship with Hora, who was like a mentor to him. Also, attending the boarding school and then going to Melbourne High School influenced his intellectual interests. (13) 'From my father and from Hora I had already acquired a sense that only morality was absolute because some of its demands were non-negotiable'. (14) Raimond Gaita definitely is influenced by his experiences because he learns about morals. (15)

Christine Gaita is Romulus's first wife and Raimond's mother. (16) She is attractive and lively, but she is troubled by mental illness, which nobody understands. This influences all of her experiences in her life, especially her relationships, which ends up influencing the choices she makes, including her suicide. (17) Christine is flirty and unreliable, which makes her life harder and causes pain for Romulus, Raimond, Mitru and Hora. (18) 'My father's devoted care of me contrasted obviously with her neglect and this fuelled the hostility towards her'. (19) 'Tom Lillie's contempt for her was common'. (20) Christine's experiences of her mental illness, her broken relationships, her failure to care for her children and the violence she experiences with Mitru influence her final decision to commit suicide. (21)

Other characters like the Hora brothers are influenced by their experiences. (22) Pantelimon Hora (always called Hora by Romulus) is influenced by his early experiences in Romania and Australia, which meant that he really values independence and freedom. (23) Hora's dream of going to university and getting a professional job in life is unfulfilled. This leads to his life-long interest in knowledge, philosophy and intellectual discussion. (24) This not only shapes Hora, but influences Raimond's intellectual interests. (25) Hora shares the same values and outlook on life as Romulus and this influences how he relates to others. (26) Dumitru Hora (always called Mitru) is influenced by his negative experiences of life, especially when he steals Christine from Romulus. His relationship with Christine only brings hardship and misery and causes him to reveal his moody, violent nature. (27) His negative experiences and the feelings of shame and guilt he has cause him also to commit suicide. (28) Although they are very different, the Hora brothers are also influenced by their experiences. (29)

In the Australian biography written by Raimond Gaita called *Romulus, My Father*, it is clear that characters are influenced by their experiences. (30) Although they all have difficult experiences, some of the characters are influenced in a positive way like developing their morals. (31) Unfortunately, the terrible experiences some characters have influence them in a negative way. (32) (830 words)

## Improvement tasks

- 11 Inappropriate topic sentence. Delete.
- 12 Storytelling from 'During his childhood' to 'dog was murdered'. Rewrite this section by reducing the amount of description and incorporating some concise interpretation.
- 13 Develop an interpretation for the previous evidence.
- 14 Incorporate this quote into a sentence and provide an interpretation.
- 15 Is this an adequate concluding sentence?
- 16 Inappropriate topic sentence. Delete.
- 17 The student seems to be raising an important point – rewrite the sentence so that the expression is clearer.
- 18 Rewrite so that this is relevant to the topic.
- 19 Place quote in a sentence and develop an interpretation.
- 20 Is this quote necessary? If so, place quote in a sentence and develop an interpretation.
- 21 Write an appropriate concluding sentence.
- 22 Write a more effective topic sentence.
- 23 Evidence and interpretation required.
- 24 Evidence and interpretation required.
- 25 Explain this idea.
- 26 Evidence and interpretation required.
- 27 Evidence and interpretation required.
- 28 Evidence and interpretation required.
- 29 Write an effective concluding sentence.
- 30 Awkward expression – rewrite so that links with topic are clearly expressed.
- 31 Awkward expression and general comment. Rewrite.
- 32 Awkward expression and general comment. Rewrite.

**ESSAY TOPIC**

**'For the people in *Romulus, My Father*, work is central in building strength of character.'**  
**Discuss.**

**1 Key words**

Write out the key words/phrases in the topic.

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**2 Synonyms**

Give synonyms for the key words/phrases.

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**3 Paraphrase of topic – #1**

Write a paraphrase of the topic by directly substituting the key words/phrases with appropriate synonyms.

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**4 Paraphrase of topic – #2**

Write a paraphrase of the topic by reversing the order of ideas in the original topic statement – i.e. begin with the second half of the topic statement sentence.

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**5 What do I have to think and write about?**

Complete the following sentence in order to understand the demands of the topic.

***In order to answer this topic, I must think and write about*** \_\_\_\_\_

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**6 Questioning the topic**

List your own questions about the topic and consider possible answers.

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**7 My point of view – Agree? Disagree? Maybe?**

Revise your responses to the preceding tasks. Based on these responses, determine your point of view on the topic. Using a combination of words/phrases from your responses, write a sentence stating your point of view.

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### 8 My first reason (body paragraph one)

Complete the following proforma by stating your reason for asserting this point of view. You may add more evidence as appropriate.

➤ *Reason* \_\_\_\_\_

➤ *Evidence* \_\_\_\_\_

➤ *Evidence* \_\_\_\_\_

### 9 My second reason (body paragraph two)

Complete the following proforma by stating your reason for asserting this point of view. You may add more evidence as appropriate.

➤ *Reason* \_\_\_\_\_

➤ *Evidence* \_\_\_\_\_

➤ *Evidence* \_\_\_\_\_

### 10 My third reason (body paragraph three)

Complete the following proforma by stating your reason for asserting this point of view. You may add more evidence as appropriate.

➤ *Reason* \_\_\_\_\_

➤ *Evidence* \_\_\_\_\_

➤ *Evidence* \_\_\_\_\_

### 11 My fourth reason (body paragraph four)

Complete the following proforma by stating your reason for asserting this point of view. You may add more evidence as appropriate.

➤ *Reason* \_\_\_\_\_

➤ *Evidence* \_\_\_\_\_

➤ *Evidence* \_\_\_\_\_

### 12 Conclusion

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\_\_\_\_\_  
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## THE TEXT RESPONSE TRAINING ESSAY



Complete the following essay by writing appropriate paragraphs for each topic sentence by drawing on your knowledge of the text. Ensure that you develop your ideas in line with the contention and topic sentences. Incorporate both direct and indirect references to the text. Also write a conclusion for the essay.

When you have completed this essay, brainstorm other approaches to the topic.

## ESSAY TOPIC

**'The friendship between Romulus and Hora had more influence on Raimond's life than the absence of his mother.'** Discuss.

Beginning in the backblocks of Victoria at the Bonegilla Migrant Camp and extending throughout their lives, the profound friendship between Romulus Gaita and Pantelimon Hora had a lasting influence on Raimond Gaita. Despite the tragedies and consequent difficulties, Raimond learnt about the value of friendship and the worthiness of developing steadfast values. It was in witnessing this friendship that he gained a respect and curiosity for intellectual pursuits. Although his mother was neglectful and absent in his life, the older Raimond reflects with some regret on their lack of relationship.

Raimond learns the value of loyalty and friendship through the example of Romulus and Hora.

The shared interest in living a decent life with a clear moral code exemplified by Romulus and Hora has an ongoing effect on Raimond's development.

At the heart of the friendship between the men is a great respect for knowledge and scholarship, which influences Raimond.

Despite her neglect, betrayal and absence, Raimond regrets his lack of relationship with his mother.

Conclusion