

Sample response: Nonfiction

Prescribed text: *Romulus, My Father*, Raimond Gaita, 1999

Related text: *Gary's House*, Debra Oswald, 2000 (drama)

Statement about belonging and understanding directly related to the question through the thesis statement	<p>Understanding and belonging have a curious relationship. On the one hand, understanding or empathy for others helps you to accept them and to be inclusive. Lack of understanding can be the reason for excluding people. But understanding is also often necessary if one is already in a situation of belonging; knowing about what and who you belong to can offer emotional nourishment. This latter interpretation of understanding and belonging is in play in the biography <i>Romulus, My Father</i>. Developed from a eulogy for his father, Raimond Gaita uses the process of memory to understand his past and what it is he belongs to. The same search for what it means to belong can be seen in Debra Oswald's play <i>Gary's House</i>, which explores the importance of family and the Australian 'dream' of owning a house. In both texts, the writer, Raimond Gaita and the protagonist, Gary, come to an understanding of what belonging means to them; self-awareness is the main focus in both. This self-awareness includes the knowledge of what it means not to be understood. For each, belonging is about place and relationships, but in Gaita we see that belonging is also about ideas and beliefs. What we also see implicitly through comments made about the respective pasts of each person is that lack of understanding can prevent belonging.</p>
Context Relationship of place to belonging is discussed, with supporting evidence from text	<p>Belonging is often deeply connected to place and for migrants venturing to a new land there is an obvious dislocation from place. Gaita follows the pathway of his parents from Germany to Australia in 1950. Exact dates and descriptions of places give us a sense of objectivity about where the family moves to, but in amongst the factual statements, Gaita also takes time to describe the landscape as "one of rare beauty". He says that "to a European or English eye it seems desolate, and even after forty years, my father could not become reconciled to it". Gaita demonstrates what a strong contrast can emerge from the same view of what Raimond Gaita regards as "noble gums", interpreted by Romulus as "symbols of deprivation and barrenness". For Gaita's mother, "a city girl from Europe", a dead red gum "became for my mother a symbol of her desolation". In a moment of epiphany when he is an adolescent, Gaita starts to see the landscape as one of "special beauty, disguised until I was ready for it". Gaita's alertness to the landscape about him and his changed sensibility in this very lyrical passage illustrate more than just an aesthetic sensibility. By admiring the scene which was so foreign and unacceptable to his father, Gaita is also indicating a move away from the father. Romulus never understands the landscape and consequently never belongs. He remains unmoved by the landscape, failing to understand it in his early years, causing a dangerous fire that distanced him from his neighbours and led to his ridicule in the local newspaper. Gaita articulates for us, and for himself, an understanding of the constant struggle between the past and honouring his father, and the present in which always he lives through the landscape. He shows us that belonging is not easy to perceive and that there are forces from within and without that shape our sense of belonging.</p>
Final statement in the paragraph sums up the pressures of place versus family in the quest to belong – taps into the thesis about the self, in the statement <i>forces from within</i>	
Connections between the two texts are indicated by the use	<p>Gary, the eponymous protagonist of <i>Gary's House</i>, also finds himself in a different setting from what he has been used to. Like Romulus, he has made the decision to move but, unlike Romulus, he embraces his new place</p>

of *also* in the first sentence and *unlike* in the following sentence, which develop the comparison

positively. Isolated on a building site, he works hard to create his own home. In building his home he is fully aware of the importance of place and its relationship to family and imparts this to his girlfriend Sue-Anne who proudly says, “Gary’s building a house for me and the baby”. Having been deprived of family in his youth, which was filled with foster homes, and then living a violent adulthood, he sees the house he is building as a refuge, as his “last chance”. He identifies this lack of belonging and connects his home with the future he wants. Like Gaita, he is responding to his past and trying to understand what it is that belonging means to him. More than that, he is consciously crafting a new belonging, choosing to leave behind the past and to shape a new life. He sees exclusion from family life as having a detrimental effect on his relationships with people and he knows he’s “gotta concentrate on getting on with people”. The struggles he undergoes to achieve a home mark him as an Aussie ‘battler’, part of the Australian psyche, belonging to a cultural tradition.

Connection: *just as tough*

Supporting evidence given as quotation in brackets

Analysis and connection to the question with the word *understanding*

For Gaita’s family the struggle is just as tough but the outcome is different. Gaita’s family goes against the usual expectations applied to a male household, with the most important impetuses for Gaita being reading and thinking. He connects his love of learning and story to his father who, because of a postal delay, could not sit for an examination. The book is interspersed with memories of philosophical talks that took place (“Hora’s stories were always of men with ideals”) showing the foundation of his own thinking as a philosopher. Gaita is not only understanding the family he belongs to but he is seeking an understanding of the pathway that led him to the world of philosophy. In particular, his strong ethical stance on animals was born of the attitudes he saw demonstrated in his father’s life. The concepts of right and wrong and of truth were a special part of his world. Essentially, he came from a family that, despite their struggles, valued education and the pathway was formed for him to follow. Gaita makes clear his purpose when he states:

The past is connected to Gaita’s own context as a philosopher

The philosopher Plato said that those who love and seek wisdom are clinging in recollection to things they once saw. On many occasions I have had the need to say: ... I know what a good workman is; I know what honest means; I know what 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.

Gaita recollects the past to understand what it is that makes him who he is and this includes his love of learning. Even though he moves away to London, he remains linked in thinking with the world of his father and Hora.

This paragraph looks at the second part of the question, providing a balanced reading of the two texts by using words such as *similar* and *same* to link common ideas

But while these texts are a celebration of belonging, they also illustrate the lack of belonging that eventuates when there is no understanding. Romulus doesn’t understand the landscape and he never belongs there. When he first arrives in Australia he faces discrimination and prejudice against ‘New Australians’. Near the end of his life “attitudes to New Australians had changed” and he starts a friendship with some hippies. Christina, his wife, has a mental illness, which is never understood in her lifetime. She is shown in her aimless life without a home and her tragic fall is evident in the move from positive to negative adjectives applied to her, from “attractive” and “well-educated” to “characterless” and “desperately lonely”. There is a similar contrast in the descriptions of Vacek, the wild-looking man who visits, who is

“fearsome” in appearance but has “a sense of communion with animals.” He also is a victim of lack of understanding, frequently ending up in psychiatric hospitals. The outcome for Mitru and Christina is suicide, as they face a world that doesn’t accept them. Dave in *Gary’s House* describes the failure of couples such as Mitru and Christina when he says, “They connect to the broken bits”. In *Gary’s House*, Gary finds the same solution of suicide when he sees the loss of his dream, after his pregnant girlfriend Sue-Anne leaves him and his sister comes to claim her part of the inheritance and destroy his vision of a home and family.

Belonging implied through the word *roots*

In his attempt to understand his roots and in particular his mother, Gaita searches through photos (“photographs show her dressed elegantly”), he asks neighbours for their memories (“Mikkelson remembers her as ‘very intelligent’ and a ‘woman of substance’”) and he interrogates his own experiences (“it took some years for me to understand this aspect of my father”). The pathway to acceptance of his mother is difficult and is not resolved until many years after her death when finally Romulus, his son Raimond and their friend Hora realise the extent of the influence of mental illness, acknowledging that her “life and behaviour were affected by her psychological illness”.

Link to related text and discussion of character

The same search for meaning through understanding his past is conveyed in the dialogue of Gary, who shares the stories of his life, justifying his need for a home. Gary comprehends how important a home is to him. He is fully conscious of the effect of belonging on his emotional equilibrium and of the intricate interrelationship of the house he is building, the baby that he is awaiting, his love for Sue-Anne, and his own sense of well-being. His suicide in the middle of the play breaks the unity of the play, suggesting the extreme despair that comes when belonging is lost. In the second half of the play, his sister, Christine, takes on the role of the battler, building the house, taking on the responsibility for Sue-Anne and her baby, demonstrating another break from convention with a woman occupying the traditionally male role. Like Gary she has expectations about family and thinks, “We can make that work as well as half the bloody families out there”.

Structure of the play is connected to themes and characterisation

Conclusion with a statement that reflects the question but is not a direct quotation

So it can be seen that the pathway to belonging is not an easy one. Belonging comes about from the understanding of others around you as they embrace you and invite you into their lives. Without that support the individual can feel isolated and can lose the will to live. But the texts *Romulus, My Father* and *Gary’s House* both also illustrate the importance of the inner search. By understanding their pasts, the characters of each text can move towards an understanding of themselves and an acceptance of the past to which they belong, while carving out a future.

Notes from the Marking Centre: Raimond Gaita, *Romulus, My Father*

Also read the Notes from the Marking Centre on page 77

Stronger responses engaged confidently with the quotation, skilfully connecting the experiences of the different characters with the notion of understanding, and evaluating the extent to which their sense of belonging had been ‘nourished’ in Australia. These responses tended to start with the central idea of belonging to, and understanding, a particular culture, but then developed their argument as they considered the relationships between the characters, the isolation of Christine,

the connection of Raimond to the Australian landscape, or the transcendent sense of ‘common humanity’ that Romulus ultimately felt. Many also incorporated insightful discussion of the migrant experience and its differing impact on Raimond and the other immigrant characters in the text. These responses were discerning in their choice of textual support, demonstrating a strong grasp of the text as a whole, its structure and philosophical tone.

Weaker responses focused more literally on the notion of characters being understood or misunderstood without meaningful analysis of the consequences of this and with little or no discussion of the concept of nourishment. These responses tended to be more narrow in focus and limited to just one aspect of the text, for example Romulus and the landscape. These responses often relied on retell and where textual features were identified they were often not explained or connected to the concept or the comment.

Sample response: Poetry

~~Prescribed text: Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed. James Reeves, 1959~~

~~Related text: North Country, Nikki Caro, 2005 (film)~~

<p>Response starts with direct agreement with the quotation in the question and elaborates on this</p>	<p>It is certainly true that ‘understanding nourishes belonging’. People are united through systems of belonging such as gender or age groups or professional, personal or social interests. However, it is also true that lack of understanding of others’ circumstances and perspectives can lead to exclusion and ostracism. These ideas are explored in Emily Dickinson’s nineteenth century poetry about nature and personal and social relationships and in Nikki Caro’s 2005 film, North Country, which is based on the true story of women fighting for equal employment rights in a Minnesota mining town in the 1980s. Dickinson explores the tensions between the individual and the wider world, showing how knowledge and understanding can lead to both inclusion and a desire for isolation and separation. Caro is more straightforward; North Country clearly shows how discrimination and differences in values can lead to marginalising, exclusion and divisions within families and the community. Both texts challenge some of the assumptions held about belonging, particularly that it is good to belong, and that those who are excluded must be unhappy in their exclusion.</p>
<p>Gives a quick synopsis of how each text illustrates the topic of the question</p>	<p>Paradoxically, not belonging creates its own inclusive group. Lack of understanding may have caused the initial exclusion, but those excluded understand each other’s plight and nourish each other. The women mine workers in North Country are united through the discrimination they suffer. The lawyer, as another outsider, becomes part of their group, learns of their problems and acts to help them defeat discrimination. The marginalised members of the town band together and understand one another’s problems, gaining the strength to overcome injustice and become accepted. Dickinson makes the same point in ‘I died for beauty’. Beauty and Truth understand each other; they are “kinsmen” united in the grave. This is a metaphorical death, caused by sensibilities that cannot survive in the everyday world. Beauty and Truth belong with each other but not in the hard, realistic external world – they have “died”, “failed” and they are “covered up” out of sight and out of mind to others. The lines:</p>
<p>States a thesis in the last sentence of the introduction</p>	<p>Paradoxically, not belonging creates its own inclusive group. Lack of understanding may have caused the initial exclusion, but those excluded understand each other’s plight and nourish each other. The women mine workers in North Country are united through the discrimination they suffer. The lawyer, as another outsider, becomes part of their group, learns of their problems and acts to help them defeat discrimination. The marginalised members of the town band together and understand one another’s problems, gaining the strength to overcome injustice and become accepted. Dickinson makes the same point in ‘I died for beauty’. Beauty and Truth understand each other; they are “kinsmen” united in the grave. This is a metaphorical death, caused by sensibilities that cannot survive in the everyday world. Beauty and Truth belong with each other but not in the hard, realistic external world – they have “died”, “failed” and they are “covered up” out of sight and out of mind to others. The lines:</p>
<p>Topic sentence develops the concept further and begins with discussion on the related text</p>	<p>Paradoxically, not belonging creates its own inclusive group. Lack of understanding may have caused the initial exclusion, but those excluded understand each other’s plight and nourish each other. The women mine workers in North Country are united through the discrimination they suffer. The lawyer, as another outsider, becomes part of their group, learns of their problems and acts to help them defeat discrimination. The marginalised members of the town band together and understand one another’s problems, gaining the strength to overcome injustice and become accepted. Dickinson makes the same point in ‘I died for beauty’. Beauty and Truth understand each other; they are “kinsmen” united in the grave. This is a metaphorical death, caused by sensibilities that cannot survive in the everyday world. Beauty and Truth belong with each other but not in the hard, realistic external world – they have “died”, “failed” and they are “covered up” out of sight and out of mind to others. The lines:</p>
<p>Relates this to the prescribed text, referring directly to techniques and lines from the poem as supporting evidence</p>	<p>Paradoxically, not belonging creates its own inclusive group. Lack of understanding may have caused the initial exclusion, but those excluded understand each other’s plight and nourish each other. The women mine workers in North Country are united through the discrimination they suffer. The lawyer, as another outsider, becomes part of their group, learns of their problems and acts to help them defeat discrimination. The marginalised members of the town band together and understand one another’s problems, gaining the strength to overcome injustice and become accepted. Dickinson makes the same point in ‘I died for beauty’. Beauty and Truth understand each other; they are “kinsmen” united in the grave. This is a metaphorical death, caused by sensibilities that cannot survive in the everyday world. Beauty and Truth belong with each other but not in the hard, realistic external world – they have “died”, “failed” and they are “covered up” out of sight and out of mind to others. The lines:</p>