This text is the BIOGRAPHY of Romulus Gaita, written by his son, Raimond. However, we learn as much about Raimond as we do about Romulus.

As you prepare for the exam, you need to reflect an ability to respond to these key questions:

What are the main themes and issues?

When writing your essay, try to find a key scene which highlights one or two of these issues. Is there a quote you can incorporate into your essay which embodies this theme?

How are these themes conveyed through the events, characters, action or dialogue?

How are the themes relevant to today’s society?

The author aims to convey experiences and perceptions to the reader which are relevant, regardless of the period of time. The text aims to engage the reader’s interest by presenting the story so that its themes are accessible and of interest, to many people.

In Romulus, you might find that Raimond, the son of a migrant shares experiences which YOU, the son or daughter/grandchild of migrant parents or grandparents share. In this case, you may be able to empathise. If not, you might have friends who do, and you gain a more profound understanding of them. If you have had no direct links to the experiences portrayed in the text, ask yourself, how you have been challenged by the story? How is it insightful? How, have your ideas and perceptions been changed or extended?

Do you agree with the author’s point of view about these themes and issues?

What are your feelings and opinions? Has society offered systems or assistance to help new migrants, or laws which deal with racism? You might like to contemplate the state of our detention centres which are full of political refugees. Is war and displacement the same now as it was in the 1950’s?
SETTING QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Where, both culturally and geographically, is the text set?

Although Romulus is Yugoslavian, his wife is German and his two best friends are Romanian.

Why might this be important? Compare them to the Australian neighbours, especially the women when compared to Christine. What identifiable AUSTRALIAN characteristics can you find? What was Gaita attempting to convey to you?

In what period of time is the text set? (Is it spread across a period of time, say many generations?)

The biography is set during the 1950’s and 1960’s in rural Victoria. He concludes the text with personal information on his life as a married man and a father. What does this suggest to you about his father? What is he offering? Consider that in times of enormous difficulties, motherless, isolated and lonely, children with one strong parent, children find resilience and lead successful and fulfilling lives.

Find some examples which display the period of time.
SETTING

The text begins in Yugoslavia and then moves to Australia.

What techniques does Gaita use to show comparison? Have these words been successful in conveying a sense of isolation, distance, alienation and loneliness? Compose a word bank which identifies these words and use them in the body of your essay, to show detailed knowledge.

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

• What key events underpin the plot development?

• In what sequence do these events occur (structure)?

• How do the events of the plot fit into a ‘real’ timeline?
Following World War II, the Australian Government, initiated a program to encourage migration, to build the seriously depleted workforce, as so many soldiers were killed in the war.

Migrants were offered free transportation provided that they work and remain in the country for at least two years. This created a wave of immigration, mainly from southern Europe, which transformed the social fabric of Australia.

However, some of the most confronting aspects of immigration are reflected through Raimond’s recollections of the prejudice and ridicule his father had to face.

*Romulus, My Father* also explores a society which did not yet diagnose post-natal depression. Unfortunately, it was a period where post-natal depression or clinical depressions were not acknowledged as a form of mental illness.

**GENRE QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER**

- What is the form of the text?

- Why do you think the author has chosen this particular form?

- How does he use the genre to create meaning?

- What audience does the language appeal to? Why?
How is the language appropriate for a wide audience?

GENRE

The novel is a biography and an autobiography which pays homage to Romulus, who struggled to overcome the obstacles of poverty, living in a society completely different to what he has known and a dysfunctional marriage.

It is through the telling of Romulus' story that the difficulties faced by post war immigrants are revealed to the reader without exaggeration. Gaita does not aim to evoke sympathy; instead, it is understanding he desires.

It is a text which is a social commentary as it presents and explores many topical issues through the characters such as prejudice and mental illness; through his recollections of his mother's battle with depression, Gaita focused on the effects that it can have on the individual and those closest to them. He also examines the way that it was perceived and treated by the broader community.

Romulus, My Father includes both a third person and first person account of the challenges faced by his mother, father and their friends.

Romulus, My Father is ultimately a story of a father and son relationship. Particular attention is given to the importance of integrity and identity.
STRUCTURE QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- How is the text structured?

- Why has Gaita chosen to implement the structure he uses?

- How is the structure used to explore characters, themes and issues?

STRUCTURE

Romulus, My Father is largely told chronologically, beginning in Yugoslavia and tracing the physical and emotional journey of his father and those he shared his life with. There are no attempts to romanticise or avoid examining the often painful experiences of his father’s life.

Gaita presents his family’s journey, not only as immigrants in a foreign and remote land, but as individuals dealing with an often traumatic emotional journey.

Gaita often reflects on the importance of friendship, family, self-respect, work and love and his father’s teachings.

However, although we are made aware of several key aspects of the plot, it is a reflection on the life of Romulus.
STYLE QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

• What style is employed by Gaita to bring understanding to the plight of his father?

• How can Romulus be said to be a tragic literary figure?

• How does Romulus show the respect he has for his father?

• How does Gaita protect his mother from being judged too harshly by the reader?

• How is the landscape used to convey meaning?
STYLE

Although the subject matter of Romulus, My Father is often tragic, Gaita does not burden the reader with an overt sense of pathos (suffering or tragedy) despite the intense suffering that his mother and father endure.

He was careful to record both the facts of his childhood and the impressions that the events and the characters had made on him.

Despite his honest portrayal of his family, he managed to remain respectful of the human frailty he exposes.

Ultimately it is a celebration of his father’s virtues, resilience and endurance, but it is also a reflection on what he had learnt from all he witnessed and experienced.

The story is told in the style of ancient myths and legends, with the hero suffering tragic events at the hands of the gods.

The novel pays homage to the kind of man Romulus was and this is ultimately what drives the novel. However, although the novel is ultimately about Romulus, the way that the story is told tells us a lot about Raimond Gaita himself and the impact that his life with his father has had on him.

His profuse admiration for the virtues and talents of his father is abundantly clear; however, he avoided overstating them. Instead, he tried to show the reader the strengths and vulnerabilities of all the characters through both examples and snippets of dialogue.

List the strengths and vulnerabilities evident in the text and support them with quotes.

Gaita was careful not to judge his mother; instead, he highlights the pathos of her life and the struggles that his father, Mitru, and he experienced through their relationships with her.

Gaita often described the landscape to reflect the emotional or mental states of his characters, especially his mother. The barrenness of the isolated stony paddocks were described in great detail to describe the sense of banishment that he imagined that she felt whilst she was living with them.

Focusing on his mother, what issues about her mental state did he address? List these with supporting quotes, where they occur and what messages do you think he wants his readers to contemplate. Is he saying anything about his own personal feelings as well? If so, what are they?
CHARACTER QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

• Who are the major and minor characters?

• How do they relate and act toward other characters?

• What changes do they reflect? What was/were the catalysts?

• In what ways do these characters assist in the development of key themes and issues in the text?
CHARACTERS

The word PROTAGANIST is derived from the Greek language which means important character.

The word ANTAGONIST is also Greek and means the opposition in a drama or narrative.

ROMULUS

- Raimond describes him as ‘a man of practical genius’.
- Romulus was born in 1922 in Markovac, the Romanian speaking part of Yugoslavia.
- His father had died when he was still an infant and when the mother took up with another man, he was forced to go and live with his grandfather.
- His uncle was an alcoholic, who had made his life a living misery and he had had enough. However, he resisted killing him.
- He had a profound love of learning, which flourished early in his life. Sadly, his scholarship application got lost in mail. However, his determination to educate himself was not deterred.
- Although Romulus knew only poverty (owning only one pair of shoes), he aspired to having more.
- Romulus left home in 1935 and at the age of 13, made his way to a village about 150 kilometres away, where he found an apprenticeship as a blacksmith. He excelled in his craft to become a man of ‘practical genius’.
- Despite his labour, his work did not bring him an income. He was industrious enough to earn it through odd jobs and other skills he had, such as cleaning guns and through the black market. This facilitated an ability to support himself and later his family, with food and water.
- Romulus finished his apprenticeship at 17. His resilience encouraged him to escape a doomed fate. He went to Germany and met Christine, who became his wife, when she was only 16 and he was 22. The romance continued, despite the Nazi racial policy.
- This forced them to secretly conduct their romance and Romulus had told Raimond that he believed that he was conceived in a graveyard.
- Even before the young Gaita family arrived in Australia, Raimond’s parents’ relationship was strained, as his mother was prone to depression.
- She had affairs with other men and her lack of maternal instinct made her a negligent mother to her young son. It is also possible though, that her depression exacerbated the neglect. It is also possible that she might have suffered post-natal depression, which was unknown in Australia in the 1950’s.
- The family was transported to Bonegilla, a migrant camp, as were many other families. Raimond and his mother were settled there, while Romulus went to work.
HE WAS A MAN WHO:

- Derived great pleasure from using his hands for his craft.
- “Called himself a gypsy” (had a dark complexion and intense eyes).
- “His face was as open as his character”.
- Felt himself fortunate to be in Australia, not at all bitter about the laborious nature of his initial work ‘had a long time to accept what fate dealt him’.
- He believed that TRUTH was the ultimate human need. “He could not understand how anyone could prefer to live in ignorance or illusions”.
- Was a fierce parent, with strong morals, evidenced when Romulus was harshly disciplining Raimond over the missing razor.
- He is a committed parent, often driving long dangerous distances to buy his son fruit which he himself does not eat. Demands that his son is well educated. Raimond attends boarding school, and is constantly surrounded by books his father buys him.
- Demonstrated that he had a temper when his morals were challenged. He loathed lies and deceit.
- This passion for truth, the core of his being, is evidenced when Lydia lies to him. He falls into a state of profound depression, as if destroyed.
- He is sage (wise) and very humanistic, understanding of individuals who have been affected by their alien environments and the ravages of war, such as Vacek and Christine.
- He is a loyal friend and committed to his relationships with people. He never entirely gives up on people, especially evidenced by his commitment to Christine when she leaves him, and the two girls she abandons.
- His believed in the inextricable link between work and character, deserving of respect and a good name.
- He was philosophical, and spent hours discussing life and meaning with Hora.
- Was exposed to human frailty early in his life, which may go some way to explain why he was so sympathetic to it throughout his life.
RAIMOND

- The narrator of the story.

- He was neglected whilst living with his mother, Raimond as a child, got involved in petty theft and begging with a school friend and then spent the money on luxuries.

- Raimond was raised almost single-handedly by his father and Hora.

- During his life at Frogmore, Raimond spent a lot of time alone with only his dog for company: “I doubt that I would have coped without the dogs” (p.30). Consequently, he had a lot of time to ponder his situation and became quite introspective.

- A solitary child, observant, resilient and an avid reader.

- Surrounded by strong male figures, predominantly Hora, his father and his teacher Ronald Mottek. They provided him with many life lessons, both practical and philosophical.

- Hora fed him and taught him to swim, as well as giving him a love of ideas, which led him to become engaged in philosophical concepts.

- Hora and Raimond formed close bonds, and was highly influential, a man he loved and trusted:

  “I trusted Hora so completely.”

- A lover of his immediate surroundings:

  “the landscape seemed to have a special beauty... subtle and refined”.

- He has a profound adoration and love for his father, evidenced throughout the body of the text. His love for his father is THE reason he wrote his book, it is as if every aspect of his life is somehow related to what his father might have thought regarding these actions and decisions.

- Romulus relentlessly tried to build strength of character in Raimond as he feared that he would become like his mother. He often tried to instil decency in him. After he found that his razor was missing, he implored:

  “you must not lie. This is worse than any damage you might do.” (p.49)

- He is strong because of his father’s strength which he constantly witnesses, his work ethic gives Raimond a strong work ethic, his commitment to relationships motivates him to seek out his sisters and form a relationship with them, and allows him to come to peace with his mother’s suicide.

- He was not overly judgmental, and saw individuals through his father’s eyes, especially Vacek, animals such as Orloff and the mischievous cockatoo.

- He was greatly influenced by his father’s moral beliefs, which are at the core of his writing and teaching of Philosophy.
HORA (PANTELMON HORA)

- Was Raimond’s lifelong friend.
- Also a migrant, who came to Australia with his brother Mitru.
- Well educated and escaped the communists in Romania.
- Both brothers were well educated, with both having completed high school, but had been denied university study until they joined the Communist Party. Being a man of principals, he refused to be bribed and fled the country; first to Italy and then to Australia.
- His story represents a political refugee’s experience, one who was imprisoned but escaped to find a democratic world, one where he could speak freely and not live in a corrupt society.
- He and his brother escaped from Yugoslavia to avoid joining the Communism that was tearing the country apart. Being two years older than his brother, he urged him to join him before:

“The weight of communism’s oppressive apparatus fell upon both of them.” (p.15)

- Hora demonstrated a very real concern for humanity, displayed when Raimond wanted to discuss radical left wing politics:

“Hora did not refuse to speak to me out of anger or indignation. He simply couldn’t speak.”

- Hora and Romulus were close because they shared the same philosophies, those which embraced hard work, respect, commitment and responsibility for personal actions.
- He remained a stoic and loving friend of Romulus even during his depression, despite the anger and detachment Romulus demonstrated.
- He was “particularly handsome” and spoke with “power and passion”. Hora was a striking man; taller and stronger than his brother.
- Was an avid reader and loved Raimond sincerely, teaching him to swim, and feeding him “oranges and treats”.
- He was like a surrogate father to Raimond, at one stage desperate to adopt Christine and his brother’s children, and experienced a deep sense of loss when he was rejected as an adoptive parent.
- Raimond at one point became torn between his loyalties to his father and to Hora, but his integral role in his life was clear:

“I owed to Hora the development of my interest in ideas…More than anyone else…I owed the course of my life to Hora”. (p.72)
• Had a relationship with Raimond’s mother, often violent but stayed with her until his suicide.

• Raimond was also aware of his suffering due to his relationship with his mother, which may explain why he did not feel any resentment towards him: “I did not...fully know the degree of his pain. My mother had other lovers and he was tormented by jealousy.” (p.26)

• Raimond developed a strong relationship with Mitru while he was living in Melbourne. Mitru was very paternal towards him, showing the care that Christine never could.

• Mitru was distressed that he could not afford to buy Raimond new shoes. To compensate, he bought him a second hand pair.

• The ultimate humiliation as a father figure came when Raimond was caught stealing and was returned home by the police. Mitru conceded defeat by sending Raimond back to live with his father.

• Raimond appreciated that Mitru had been his father figure for a year: “I became close to Mitru...He was gentle, quick to laughter and with a wit that showed the sharpness and delicacy of his intelligence”. (p.26)

• Was shamed that Romulus financially supported him and Christine in both Melbourne and Maryborough.

• Financial difficulties forced Mitru and Christine to move into a saloon with Mr. and Mrs. Foschia, where baby Susan was born. The relationship was unraveling rapidly and when Christine began flirting with some young men, they fought and he cried as “he knew he was at the end”. (p.87)

• His suicide was a combination of a loss of his self-respect, frustration at his financial situation, a fear for his own internalised grief and an inability to believe that he would be a capable father.

• He did believe in the afterlife, hoping that in death, he might find truth and hope. His epitaph read:

“Belief in the afterlife is the only hope in us”.

• In contemplating why Mitru committed suicide, Raimond concluded that even:

“in his own eyes Mitru was a wretched man”. (p.93)
CHRISTINE

- Black hair, a good figure, an open face with intense dark eyes and a musical voice, she was attractive and flirtatious.

- Came from a middle class family in Germany and was well educated, fond of Shakespeare and the theatre.

- “Prone to tempestuous jealousy”, her relationship with her husband was heated and turbulent.

- Gaita captured the essence of his mother when he recalled the “haunting intensity of my mother’s eyes”. (p.9)

- Demonstrated signs of mental instability once Raimond was born and was unable to care for him maternally and emotionally. She was also neglectful of her daughter Susan.

- Her life was punctuated with great suffering, and she dreamed, when pregnant, that “This child I am carrying will suffer”.

- From the outset, her postnatal depression had set in where “she seemed incapable of taking care of me”. (p.8)

- Did not really settle upon arrival in Australia which was characterised by bouts of asthma and restlessness.

- She suffered from isolation and displacement, did not settle into motherhood or responsible marriage (did not like to cook or clean, leaving much of this to her husband).

- Sought distractions with other men, even on board the ship, but also at Frogmore and in Maryborough at the boarding house.

- Her life caused suffering for not only herself, but also all of the people who were involved with her:

  “She was a woman who liked men my father was to say later-his tone was sorrowful and reigned”. (p.83)

- Although she did not comply to conventional motherhood, she at times loved towards her son, sometimes spending hours in bed curled up with her son reading and talking.

- Had passionate and intense, sometimes violent relationship with Mitru, but still accepted handouts of cash from Raimond.

- This created constant tensions between the two because she was irresponsible with money, often buying luxurious and unnecessary dresses, rather than paying rent or buying essentials.

- She was a woman who suffered from acute depression, and Gaita observes that his mother “must have suffered depressions”.
• Her depression led to suicide attempts, with overdoses of tablets.

• Raimond observed that “her vivacity had gone” (p.32) after her first attempt at suicide.

• As a result of the conflict she had caused for Raimond and his father, Christine lay in a grave without a tombstone for many years:

  “It took many years for my father and me even to begin to resolve our intense and conflicting emotions concerning my mother”. (p.113)

• Although she causes chaos and tensions in most of those close to her, she is finally laid to rest with a headstone and forgiveness by Romulus and Raimond, which brings them closure.

  MILKA

• Plays only a small function in the text, but she is significant because she does bring a great deal of stability to Romulus.

• She also shares the same passions, morals and work ethics.

• Loves Raimond, and in return, he loves and respects her.

• Worked alongside her husband, and even went back home and gave their relations “the shirt off their backs’, thus demonstrating generosity, love and a sense of commitment.”

• Significant because she understood his illness, providing “the right kind of nurturing to function”.

• Gaita loved her “girlish innocence and vivacity that charmed many who met her”.

  ORLOFF, JACK AND VACEK

• These characters were friends and companions for the often lonely and isolated Gaita.

• Vacek Vilkovikas was an eccentric Lithuanian befriended by Romulus at the Cairn Curran camp.

• He was a recluse, who never quite came to terms with this alien environment.

• Misunderstood, but harmless, sporadically admitted to a mental asylum for brief periods.

• A gentle soul despite his fearsome appearance and one feels that he does indeed communicate with animals. He claimed that Orloff the dog spoke to him after eating the raw sausages and promised not to do it again.
• Significant because he demonstrates that not everyone who comes over as a migrant is as capable of success or survival in this harsh environment, and occasionally people become quite eccentric as they attempt to cope. Animals are the universal language and do not judge, just love unconditionally, as do children.

• Gaita recalled Vacek, who his father had met in the camp. Soon after, Vacek had been dispersed. He had lost his mind, to the point that he would cook in his own urine. Vacek was sadly an example of the dark side of migration, where some were unable to integrate into their new society.

• Jack and Orloff remind readers of the love and humour animals provide us with and the terrible sadness we feel when they die. We feel profoundly distressed at the death of these two loving companions because they provided company and affection for Raimond when he was alone.

THEMES

Themes may be stated directly by a character, presented in the introduction or title, or introduced indirectly. You can fill out the Text Proforma guide below in your own words to explore the following themes.

• Post World War Two migration.
• Friendship and betrayal.
• Mental illness.
• The destructive power of love.
• Father and son relationships.
• Core beliefs and values.
• Poverty.
• Personal integrity and sense of self.
• Goodness and truth.
• Compassion and honesty.
• Work ethics.
POST WORLD WAR TWO MIGRATION

Post war migrants were called ‘new Australians’ to set them apart from the rest of the population. Romulus first encountered the prejudice when his skills as a blacksmith were not recognised and was given menial jobs, as were all the other immigrants. This injustice was something that particularly perturbed Gaita, who observed: “In the case of my father, this unusually gifted man was set to work with a pick and shovel”. (p.16)

Romulus’ self-respect prevented him from being defeated by the prejudice he was subject to as “he was a typical immigrant of the time-had long come to accept what fate dealt him and felt no resentment or indignation”. (p.16)

His resilience at times worked against him. For example, Romulus drew public attention to himself when he tried to kill a snake by setting fire to the grass, but in the process destroyed 20 hectares of grassland. The local newspaper ridiculed his efforts and made a laughing stock of his actions, by calling him an ignorant migrant. Gaita recalled how the newspaper “ridiculed the New Australian for his folly”. (p.29)

Another example of where Romulus’ migrant status was further exploited was when his foreman at the factory threatened to sack him if he did not work late shifts, which meant that Raimond spent more time on his own, with only his dog for company.

FRIENDSHIP

The friendship between Hora and Romulus taught Raimond about the nature of true friendship which meant “seeing another person as being fully and distinctively another perspective on the world”. (p.73)

Hora and Romulus had forged a friendship that lasted a lifetime. Gaita expressed how much he respected the friendship that was indestructible: “I have never known anyone who lived so passionately, as did these two friends, the belief that nothing matters so much in life as to live it decently”. (p.101)
MENTAL ILLNESS

There are several characters who struggle with mental illness in the text. Raimond’s mother had a lifelong battle with depression, both in terms of the post-natal depression that rendered her paralysed to facilitate motherhood and the manic depression which brought about extensive crying or catatonic states where she just lay in bed the whole day: “sometimes he found her just staring into the fire”. (p.30)

Ignorant of her condition, Romulus was often distressed when he came home after working long hours to find that she had not prepared a meal and that Raimond had not been fed.

Raimond was not overly concerned by her condition as his priority was that she was there. He realised that her presence “comforted him more than food”. (p.31)

Gaita reflects on her mental illness and how misunderstood it still remains in today’s society: “No doubt we were ignorant of the nature of such illness as many people still are today”. (p.112)

Gaita had to experience both his parents’ intense suffering. His father’s struggle with it was more than Raimond could tolerate: “I left the hospital changed. My father’s insanity cast its shadow on everything”. (p.125)

THE DESTRUCTIVE POWER OF LOVE

Although there are examples of love that is positive and nurturing, such as in the love that Romulus has for Raimond, his work and Hora, there are equally, if not more examples of dysfunctional relationships.

Although having a passionate love for her husband, Christine’s infidelities began on the ship and then in the camp. Romulus was “heartbroken by his unfathomable, troubled, vivacious and unfaithful wife”. (p.19)

Despite her indiscretions, Romulus still held on to the dream that one day they would live as a family. For him, the house “offered the hope that our family might be reunited…that she might settle into the responsibilities of being a wife and mother” (It was difficult to understand why she betrayed her husband as only once did Raimond hear her complain about her husband. She told the Polish couple in Maldon “that nothing she did satisfied him”. (p.33)

Romulus was exhausted by the frustration of the situation that began so passionately: “over and over again, he asked himself why it had all turned out so? When would he be free of these troubles”. (p.42)

Romulus did not resent Mitru for having the affair with his wife. He felt a sense of compassion and understanding: “he pitied Mitru, believing he was caught in something he could not control”. (p.82)

Gaita reflected on the dark side of love and acknowledged its power beyond our control: “Mitru’s suicide and my father’s madness had convinced me that sexual love was a passion whose force and nature were mysterious”. (p.137)
**FATHER AND SON RELATIONSHIPS**

The bond between Raimond and Romulus was forged through their intense commitment to one another and to the family. This was partly driven by the lack of paternal love that he had in his life and also to compensate for the inadequate parenting of Christine.

Romulus found the proposal by people in the camp to send Raimond to a children’s home unimaginable and took to cleaning toilets to be able to look after him.

Raimond and Romulus’ views of Christine were conflicting, but he act of physically erecting a gravestone after many years, went some way to healing the wounds: “working together, our sorrow lightened”. (p.114)

During Romulus’ struggle with mental illness, Raimond realised that it was his turn to be strong. He had to overcome his own feelings if he was to support his father: “He therefore needed to be convinced that the physical means to do it were at my disposal”. (p.129)

**CORE BELIEFS AND VALUES**

Romulus made every attempt to ensure that Raimond was raised with the right core values: “Many times he told me that there are a few things more important than a good name”. (p.99)

He also wanted to impress upon his son the importance of “honesty, loyalty, courage, charity and a capacity for hard work”. (p.101)

Lydia’s letter upset his moral compass, as “Morality was for him as substantially a part of reality as the natural facts of human action and motivation”. (p.121)

Raimond observed that “compassion went unusually deep in my father. He was literally incapable of not helping someone genuinely in need if he had the means to do so”. (p.165)

Ultimately, Romulus valued truth. He acknowledged could be painful to confront, but he believed that it was our perception which determined its impact: “its capacity to damage was dependent entirely on the attitude on took to it”. (p.193) This empowered him to cope and was the key to his survival.

**POVERTY**

The grim conditions of the farmhouse at Frogmore did not depress Romulus because he had not known life without poverty and struggle, He could not be unravelled, despite sharing the house with rats: “Hora woke one night to find a large rat tugging at his elbow trying to make off with a piece of flesh”. (p.22)

Gaita reflected: “Our life at Frogmore was Spartan, but I never felt that we were poor, although we were judged so by others. My father often told me of his childhood and that informed my sense of what poverty was”. (p.53)
PREPARING FOR THE ESSAY

If you are comfortable in your knowledge and understanding of all of these areas, then you will be very well prepared for the Text Response segment of the exam. Now you need to practice your essay questions, so that you feel confident writing within a span of 45 minutes or one hour.

You will find that many of the questions look similar; they follow a similar theme. As you begin your revision, try to look for similarities in the questions, and hopefully, this will give you the confidence to master a number of essays on the same themes.

POSSIBLE ANGLES TO CONSIDER

- The question may ask you to explore relationships between characters as well as individuals and how they respond to their new environments.
- They might ask you to respond to how the events of these characters shaped their lives.
- The questions might ask you to discuss how these characters maintained their ethics, ideologies, morals and responsibilities.
- The topic questions might ask you to discuss how relationships are valuable to the characters.
- They might also ask you to discuss how the themes of the text are explored by the writer, such as friendship, the relationship between fathers and sons or migration.
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## THEMES

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### CHARACTERS

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### SETTINGS

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## RECURRING IMAGES AND SYMBOLS IN THE TEXT AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE

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<tr>
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Our initial impression of Romulus is created by the image of a man standing "with a pitchfork held tightly in both hands, knowing that he would probably kill his uncle". (p.1)

During his time in Germany he met and fell passionately in love with the sixteen year old Christine, where "their relationship was intense and fraught". (p.8)

Although Romulus tried to adapt as best he could to his new way of life, he found the landscape too foreign and desolate to acclimatise to: "after more than forty years, my father could not become reconciled to it". (p.14)

Romulus had an accident. He was tormented by the way his life had turned out and was baffled by "why it had all turned out so?" (p.42).

When Raimond was eleven, he discovered rock and roll, particularly Elvis Presley, which "excited [him] and awakened emotions [he] had never felt before."(p.59)

Gaita realises as an adult that magazines and Elvis "had fed [his] minor revolt against the adult world". (p.61)

He does not resent his mother, instead he reflected on her mental illness, which provoked pity in him that was "both intense and disturbingly detached." (p.77)

A letter from Mitru to Romulus arrived, outlining his ‘confession’ of his relationship with Christine, a request for a divorce and a declaration of her pregnancy. His tone was humble, alluding to the fact that for many years now “[their] roles had been reversed”. (p.77)

Raimond realised that his father’s work was an integral to his being: “His work both expressed and formed much of his character. From him, I learned the relationship between work and character”. (p.98)

Romulus decided to seek for love when he began writing to Lydia in 1957. It was a time when Raimond “could not remember him more happy”. (p.105)

Christine remained a source of conflict for Raimond and his father and consequently she remained in an unmarked grave until 1981. It was only when the two men came together and physically erected a tombstone to mark her passing, were they able to do seek closure, after they “did [their] remorseful work”.

Romulus finally expressed the pain that the memories caused him: “With shaking hands he rolled a cigarette which he smoked to help control his tears”. (p.113)

Further torment arose when Romulus found out that Lydia was already married and had deceived and exploited him so ungraciously: “It came from the question, how could she have done it”. (p.120)

Romulus was literally devastated and suffered a “personal disintegration” (p.120), which took the form of mental illness.

Despite the overt symptoms of his condition, his pride drove him to gain mastery over his illness: “He was a passionate man and his madness was passionate”. (p.127)
• Romulus began to quarrel with his friends and Hora and moved to Sydney to try and gain some distance “in the hope that physical distance from the tragedy would enable him to find the emotional distance he needed to come to terms with it”. (p.143)

• Romulus goes to Melbourne to meet Milka, with whom he began a relationship. Despite the soothing influence she had on him, they fought “sometimes vigorously and physically…the house shook with their battles”. (p.112)

• However, her strength of character helped him through his illness and provided “the right kind of nurturing to function”. (p.178)

• During his illness, Romulus’ core values failed him:

“All his life he had a strong sense of moral reality and with it a belief in the connection between goodness and simplicity. These became austere when he confronted despair and terror in his madness”. (p.171)

• Although the drought was heartbreaking, it brought out Romulus’ compassion for animals. For example, after he and Milka rescued the deformed goats, he tirelessly worked all day, to provide grass for them to eat: “He cut grass on the roadside…literally for miles”. (p.186)

• When Barbara and Susan arrive at Frogmore, Romulus felt a sense of closure and calm as he felt “the damage had been repaired”. (p.193)

• However, when he quit ironwork, his physical deterioration devastated him: “can you believe how I used to be? He asked me. “

• I’m good for nothing. Just for the rubbish heap.” (p.200)

• In his eulogy, Raimond described Romulus as a man who “never intentionally caused suffering to anyone. He was truly a man who would rather suffer evil, than do it”. (p.207)

**ESSAY TOPICS**

• How do the characters in *Romulus, My Father* evoke our admiration and pity?

• How do the characters overcome the hardships they faced in *Romulus, My Father*?

• It was Gaita’s relationship with his father that has the most impact on Raimond’s life in *Romulus, My Father*. Discuss.

• The characters in *Romulus, My Father* are victims of a tragic fate. Discuss.

• It is the virtues and strengths of the characters that make *Romulus, My Father* so memorable. Discuss.

• How does *Romulus, My Father* show that people learn from the experiences of their parents?

• *Romulus, My Father* portrays the value of true friendship. Discuss.