This Boy’s Life

i. “I had my own dreams of transformation...”
‘The reader feels that Toby and his mother are never going to be able to improve their lives.’

Do you agree?

Wolff’s memoir This Boy’s Life positions its readers to question the ability of Tobias and his mother to ‘change [their] luck’. In the midst of the post-war conservative backlash the pair are caged by societal norms that prevent them from achieving their ‘dreams of transformation.’ Furthermore, Tobias’ impracticality and sense of entitlement lead him to reject opportunities. Despite this, the memoir ends on an optimistic note. The reader closes the novel with the belief that the lessons the pair have learned throughout their journey may offer them a chance to improve their lives.

The societal norms and expectations of the 1950’s post-war America inhibit Tobias and his mother’s ability to transform their lives. Toby’s sense of self worth is completely broken by his inability to meet the era’s stereotypes of masculinity. The notion that he ‘could not break down [his] sense of being at fault to its components’ who he is reveals his inability to reconcile his identity with social expectations. Wolff juxtaposes Toby’s ‘natural’ desire to ‘seek status’ with his complete and total discomfort with this own self. The contrast between the pacifistic and loving young boy who cries at a squirrel’s funeral and the gun-toting, rebellious teenager is a stark one. It reveals the overpowering need that Toby feels to conform. The memoir reveals that way in which Tobias’ need to fit in prevents him from pursuing success. Rather than ‘change [his] luck, as he initially intended, Tobias camouflages himself in the safety of social norms and joins the army. His choice to return to the ‘clear life of uniforms, ranks and weapons’ cements his future. He decides to commit to leading an average life through conformity rather than stay true to his identity and pursue his dreams of ‘status’ and wealth.

Rosemary is similarly trapped by societal customs. Post-war America designates her one position in life: the role of a housewife and mother. This convention cages her, despite her attempts to escape it. The memoir emphasises the perpetual cycle of abuse that Rosemary and her son are subjected to. The opening line of the text, ‘Our car boiled over again.’, demonstrates the repetitive and fruitless nature of Rosemary’s attempts to transform her life. The inability of the 1950’s women to escape from abuse is a prevalent element of the text. It reveals the way in which such situations were treated as normal and largely ignored. The ‘strangeness’ of the cycle of abuse and oppression ‘over the years became normal’ to both Tobias and his mother. Eventually, despite her efforts to ‘run from [men she] was afraid of, Rosemary is unable to escape the pervasive violence in her life. Both she and Tobias adopt the same view of the abuse as the rest of the society does. They opt to ignore it and turn a blind eye ‘languidly [convincing themselves] that the strange noises came from cats.’ Thus, societal expectations prevent Rosemary and Tobias from achieving their ‘dreams of transformation.’

It is not social norms alone that hinder the pair’s progress in society. Toby’s impractical and idealistic nature also damage his chances of success. He feels a sense of entitlement that prevents him from working hard to improve his circumstances. Toby manages to lie and manipulate his way into a good school, Hill, but does not put any effort to secure his future there. Instead, he considers it his ‘desire and [his] right’ to be a part of this ‘great world.’ Even the prospect of being expelled due to failing classes does not spur him into action. He simply ‘pray[s] like a moslem’ that he will be allowed to stay.
In a similar manner, he also wastes opportunities to escape granted by Mr Bolger who offers him a refuge from Dwight’s abusive household. He is ‘welcomed’ by the family, yet he does nothing to repay their kindness. The troubles he causes them though his actions are forgivable, but his price and inability to take responsibility for his own wrongdoings destroy his chances of remaining in his adoptive home. Tobias refuses to apologise for siphoning fuel out of the neighbours’ trucks. This ‘brings shame’ on him and incites resentment from the Bolgers who have offered him a chance to change his future. Rather than take responsibility for his actions he ‘leaves a dummy in [his] place to look sorry...but [he is] nowhere in the neighbourhood.’ This façade of regret ultimately prevents him from finding a new home.

Wolff’s memoir, however, closes on an optimistic note. Toby is once again on the road, ‘posed for flight’, and journeying toward a brighter future. The passage is reminiscent of the opening of the text. The difference, however, is that this time Tobias is equipped with the resilience, resourcefulness and determination that he has gained from his troubled childhood. The final lines of the memoir are full of hope as Tobias shouts ‘hymns’ at the ‘top of [his] lungs’ and drives along the road to an uncertain but optimistic future. This causes the reader to question whether his dreams of transformation have truly been ‘saved’, or whether Toby is simply filled with the same naivety that he possessed at the beginning of the memoir.

The pervasive idea of ‘transformation’ and ‘changing luck’ in Wolff’s This Boy’s Life are hindered by multiple obstacles. Social norms and Toby’s personal attributes prevent the pair from transforming their lives in the memoir. The reader is left with an overwhelming sense of optimism, however though which Tobias Wolff suggests that these ‘dreams’ may eventually be realised.

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2014 Examination Report
The following response explores the implications of the topic and makes sound and thoughtful conclusions particularly well. The student is able to use examples from the text to interpret aspects of the topic. The response shows an excellent control of language, is fluent and uses appropriate vocabulary. This piece was assessed as an upper-range script.