

Sample essay: *Born a Crime*

This essay responds to the following topic on Trevor Noah's memoir *Born a Crime*:

'In *Born a Crime*, the law means different things to different people.' Discuss.

In *Born a Crime*, Noah explores his experience of growing up in a racist and segregated society, where race remained a factor in law enforcement even after the apartheid system had been officially dismantled. Although Noah's existence was not illegal, his place within his homeland was initially seen as a violation in and of itself, since under apartheid it was illegal for his parents to be in a relationship. The discrepancies between Noah's lived experience and the law meant that he came to rely on the rules of the 'hood' and the teachings of his mother to guide his moral compass. As Noah grew up, he came to recognise the injustices of a system based on racial division and that the ways in which people viewed the law varied greatly between black and white South Africans.

Noah's early childhood was severely constricted by the laws of apartheid.

Being born to a black mother and white father, Noah's very existence exposed the deeply flawed underpinnings of the government's racist ideology.

While the government separated people into races, the coloured population, including Noah, represented a fundamental problem for the apartheid system: 'races can mix – and in a lot of cases, *want* to mix' (p.21). As a result, the 'mixed' person came to represent a treasonous act that required the law to define the 'coloured person', effectively rebuking the primary goal of apartheid – the separation of white and black people. In a country where the majority of the population was identified as black, the white population created laws that ratified divisions within the black population. Noah describes the pervasive success of apartheid as being 'convincing people who were the overwhelming majority to turn on each other ... You separate people into groups and make them hate one another so you can run them all' (p.3). As a result, Noah found himself in the illogical position of defining himself within a segregated society as a 'chameleon' (p.56), belonging to neither the black group nor the white group at school, but able to act as a transient member of each. His own status as 'coloured' proved the law to be arbitrarily constructing race as a defining and even integral part of identity.

In contrast, Noah's mixed identity meant he viewed the law's neat categories of 'coloured', 'black', 'white' and 'Indian' as limiting and not consistent with his own lived experience. While some others saw him as coloured, in keeping with the apartheid view of the world, he came to identify as black, since 'with the black kids, I just was' (p.59).

As Noah grew up, he found solace with his black friends. Identifying more with the children from the 'hood', as Noah reached adolescence and young adulthood he became involved with a community in which he discerned that 'crime cared' (p.209). Given the extent of segregation in South Africa

Sets up analysis of the text with reference to law enforcement, signalling how the topic is going to be addressed.

Makes clear the central argument of the essay and connects this to the essay topic.

Goes into deeper analysis of Noah's personal experience of the law and the way in which it made him an outsider.

Uses the language of the text to demonstrate a strong engagement with it.

Integrates short, relevant quotes to substantiate the argument being developed.

Links to the central concept of the law, emphasising Noah's view of it as challenging his sense of identity.

and the continued lack of opportunities for black people, the hood became a breeding ground for crime, both petty and more sinister. Noah realised that in post-apartheid South Africa, black and white were still not equal, even if the law no longer explicitly discriminated between them. Petty crime became a meaningful way of supporting himself in a system that effectively worked in opposition to his and his friends' success. Buying and selling stolen goods, Noah created a name for himself on the streets of Soweto. Reflecting on this time in his life, Noah explains:

It's easy to be judgemental about crime when you live in a world wealthy enough to be removed from it. But the hood taught me that everyone has different notions of right and wrong, different definitions of what constitutes crime, and what level of crime they're willing to participate in. (pp.212–13)

In order to survive, petty crime was an inevitable resource in the hood. Given that the state's own policing of law-breaking was unequally distributed between black and white communities, the South African laws themselves were revealed to be deeply flawed. Unable to separate the law from the social contract developed during apartheid and maintained in post-apartheid South Africa, Noah judged right and wrong through the lens of personal experience and community expectations, rather than by the strict letter of the law.

Patricia, Noah's mother and the matriarch of the family, was instrumental in defining his sense of right and wrong in his early life. A deeply religious woman, she believed in God's ultimate authority and was guided by God in every facet of her daily life. Unable to depend on the state's laws for guidance and protection, Patricia saw God as the source of the only law that mattered: 'The only authority my mother recognised was God's. God is love and the Bible is truth – everything else was up for debate' (p.88). Despite all the violence she witnessed or endured, Noah's mother maintained her faith in God. As a result, as Noah grew up, his mother would contradict or ignore the laws imposed by the state (such as the one prohibiting her relationship with Noah's father) and encourage Noah to place his trust in God as a guiding figure. While Noah did not have the same complete trust in God, he developed a sense of right and wrong based on his interactions with his mother. When Noah was later incarcerated for a minor crime, Patricia imparted her view of the justice system: 'If the police get you, the police don't love you. When I beat you, I'm trying to save you. When they beat you, they're trying to kill you' (p.243). Where Noah could not rely on the law to guide his moral compass, his mother lived according to a different understanding of the law, one based on her experience and faith.

Ultimately, in *Born a Crime*, Noah explores the complexities of growing up in a system where his very existence as a coloured person invited

Explains another aspect of the law addressed in the text – the ways in which black people, as a result of social and economic inequality, broke the law in order to survive.

Links the discussion of the rules of the hood back to wider laws of South Africa, directly referencing the essay topic and showing the different views of 'the law' that coexisted.

Directly links the discussion in this body paragraph back to the central argument presented in the introduction.

Shows another way in which an individual regards the law.

Discusses a moment in the text, contrasting Patricia's view of the law (and law enforcement specifically) with her own view of right and wrong.

discrimination and exclusion. As a result, the governing laws contradicted his lived experience of what constituted right and wrong. Indeed, he came to see the law as a tool of the oppressor that handed out punishment based on discriminatory ideology. Both the community of the hood and Noah's mother developed their own rules for surviving, and their own understanding of where the boundaries between right and wrong truly lie. *Born a Crime* portrays a world in which people are impacted by the law in very different ways, and in turn form their own views of the real meaning of the law.

Restates the central argument made in the introduction.

Ends with a clear response to the topic.