

## Homework Help 2

Impersonal grows from personal love, the cooling breeding,  
in place of obsession, attention that seeks virtue and wisdom  
and sees the loved object as means to those things.

Jason, the high school junior assigned to me, with the daughter of the owner of the vineyard was in love. Because his parents liked his progress, my volunteer gig had turned with the season to paid summer tutoring during which Jason confided in me and completed assignments I devised. Because he was in love I had asked him to write a brief essay relating Denis Johnson's "Car Crash While Hitchhiking" to Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Love." In his first draft, he had tried to prove that the salesman driver, a minor character, the first of four to pick up the hitchhiker, in being, as Johnson says, "gifted with love," in loving his wife, kids, girlfriend, relatives, boat, two cars and backyard had, in Emerson's terms, supplanted relation after relation "only by what is more beautiful." Errors in speech point to errors in thinking, and I asked Jason to consider that in his thesis there might be a grammatical one. "Was it in where I said, 'Johnson's protagonist is a drug addict?'" he asked. "Why would it be in that sentence?" I said. "I don't know," said Jason, "should it just say he's addicted to drugs?" "I'll give you a hint," I said. "It's a preposition." "Remind me," said Jason, "what a preposition is." "Over under through with by," said I. Jason looked over his paper, at me, then over his paper again. I pointed to a region on the page. "Oh—" he said, "I said that the salesman supplants the relations 'by' when I should have said 'with.'" We high fived. "So how," I asked, "does that reveal a larger problem?" Jason then acted on an instinct I love, which was to retrieve from his backpack the Emerson essay and find in the original the disputed quote. "He says, 'That which is so beautiful and attractive as these relations must be succeeded and supplanted only by what is more beautiful, and so on forever.'" "Ok," I said, "who supplants in your thesis?" "The salesman," said Jason. "Who supplants in the Emerson?" Jason reread the quote a few times. "No one," he said. "The relations just are supplanted by each other, it's like they don't really supplant." "That's passive voice," I said, "and Emerson is using it to speak of the natural course of things, how love progresses without will, just by letting beauty have its way." "Oh," said Jason, "so I can't say the salesman supplants his wife with his girlfriend—or I can but that's not what Emerson means?" "Exactly," I said. "So what do I do?" "You revise your essay

for next week." Jason sighed and gave me a look that meant my devices were working on him, but still he was forced by his parents to attend summer tutoring that life would be better, be simpler without. Others might call this an eye roll. I laughed, and teased, "Have fun with Molly." "Molly goes to camp this week." "Oh no!" I said. "Yeah," he said, "life is over." "May as well write a good essay," I said, "that's what we do when life ends." A lot of what I told him we both hoped he'd understand later, when he was a little older. His mom honked in the Saab. She held up to the window a sandwich in a Ziploc. "Tuna," said Jason. "I'm going to a music lesson." "Why don't they let you off the hook once in a while?" "They will," said Jason. "I get August off for camp." "Have you ever done nothing or had nothing to do?" "No," he said, "but I have been bored." Sometimes it seemed like the library door remained completely open once he'd left and I'd finish the parts of the crossword I could do, until a huge wind blew the paper away and slowly, over many Thursdays, the library filled past recognition with my papers, blown against the far wall like a dune. I'd browse the DVDs, text Meg to see if she wanted anything, then stop by the IGA on my way home. Life couldn't have been more sutured to normalcy, and yet I felt like I had no family, felt far away from being known. On Friday nights, the library showed cult classics at 11. Once I saw Jason and Molly on a Friday, driving his mom's Saab away from the library. Goodbye, I thought and said quietly, Goodbye young lovers, good day, goodbye, my heart goes with you, my soul and my body – as if to them I had relinquished all memory of love, as if I had to learn it all again. The movie had been Troll Hunter and I had fallen asleep, Meg beside me eating Twizzlers. She hadn't been drinking and then she started up again. Her eyes would bug out and she'd open my door to tell me she was in love with me, that I was the most beautiful woman she'd seen. Meg, I'd say, it's time to go to sleep, but she'd say no and weep in my arms, and we would talk about her family. I was so into the idea that we knew each other fully I couldn't see I knew nothing of her. She felt like a sister but wasn't familiar to me. I didn't know how different other people could be, that my upbringing shaped my expectation of friendship, hers shaped hers differently, and by these expectations we were led blindly, laid down and swaddled. Amazingly, despite what I just said, I still believe nothing ensures a happy adult like the child's perseverance.

