Tobias Wolff’s novel *Old School* provides an unblinking examination of questions about identity and honor and their roles in society through the experiences of one boy, the unnamed narrator, at a preparatory school in the 1960s. The protagonist’s desperate desire to win the school’s literary contest, his resulting descent into plagiarism, and the moral ambiguity of his actions pose powerful questions about society’s moral code and its people’s search for their own identities. Through his authentic plot and depiction of the protagonist, Wolff weaves a powerful and determinedly honest story that observes and questions the problem of plagiarism, the search for truth and clarity, and its implications about morality and honor in modern society.

Wolff’s novel examines the epidemic of intellectual crime that occurs in today’s classroom and world in a unique light. The protagonist’s offense seems very typical, as he commits his act of plagiarism in an attempt to win the school literary contest and an audience with his personal hero, Ernest Hemingway. At first glance one would cite the usual reasons for plagiarism: ambition and a desperate fear of failure. Yet *Old School’s* protagonist has an entirely different perspective. While he longs to win the contest, he feels that in stealing Susan Friedman’s story he is telling the truth in a way that he has never done before. His true motivation is to confess, at last, that he is not the person that he pretends to be. The story tells of a Jewish girl whose life parallels that of the narrator, who, upon recognizing these similarities, says, “The whole thing came straight from the truthful diary I’d never kept” (125), and that he sees himself not only in the “obvious parallels” (125), but in the “momentary, undramatic details of Ruth’s life” (125).
The protagonist, a scholarship student with a less privileged background than many of his peers, is honest about his attempts to conceal his true upbringing, saying, “I practiced some serious dissembling of my own” (11). Yet in this story that does not belong to him, he feels a kinship with the author, who reminds the narrator of himself with accuracy, and he says, “I myself couldn’t tell us apart” (161). The story is honest to the point of discomfort, and when it begins with the line, “I hope nobody saw me pick up that cigarette butt off the sidewalk” (126), the author cannot deny his sense of painful recognition. Because of this connection, the narrator feels that in submitting the story, he is being honest with himself and his peers for the first time. Even when he is confronted with proof that he committed intellectual theft, the protagonist is shocked, saying that he “never thought of “Summer Dance” as anything but [his]” (142). This is the paradox that makes the story of the unnamed protagonist so thought provoking; he is punished for telling a truthful lie. He feels that that this act of plagiarism is more honest and brave than anything he has ever done, and struggles to throw off his carefully constructed persona, saying, “To strip yourself of pretense is to overthrow a hard master” (126). In this moment he finally accepts his own identity, and as Arch Makepeace says, “It was hard to tell the truth like that” (186).

*Old School* questions the morality of contemporary society through the lens of this instance of plagiarism. Despite his best intentions, the protagonist defies society’s code of ethics and betrays his own sense of honor. And while this powerful dichotomy of truth and fiction plays out through the narrator’s morally ambiguous actions, Wolff is by no means arguing that plagiarism is acceptable. He does quite the opposite, as his novel tells of a boy who makes a mistake and learns a crucial lesson. Although he loses his diploma and his admission to Columbia, the protagonist realizes two things: that he must tell the truth about who he is, and he
must tell the truth about what he does. He discovers the importance of honesty, not only to others, but also to himself.

Honor is a fundamental and ancient concept. It is difficult to grasp, and a sensitive subject one in today’s society, as Mr. Ramsay says, “Strange word, honor—can’t be spoken aloud, turns immediately to bilge” (149). Yet many people struggle to weigh their sense of personal integrity against their desire to succeed. Compromising one’s morals does not seem such a great price when great achievements are within reach. Wolff’s novel explores the idea that, while the boundary between right and wrong is of vital importance in America’s democratic society, the temptation to betray our morals is strong. While this is a grim reminder of all the troubles in today’s world, Wolff’s story both questions and reassures. His narrator’s ability to realize his mistakes, to learn from them, and even to become a better and wiser person because of them provides an uplifting message about humankind’s capacity for integrity and simple decency.

Works Cited