

Belonging

Exploring an Area of Study

Any Area of Study involves the exploration of an abstract, conceptual focus. It also examines the varied ways this can be represented in different texts to shape and communicate meaning. The identification of a significant, linking motif or framing device enables students to comprehend the inter-relationships that often exist between texts. It also fosters an appreciation for the ways composers have moulded and manipulated audience perceptions.

'Belonging' is a complex, multi-faceted concept that highlights our inherent need to feel connection with our peers. Depending on context, medium, purpose, audience and register, varied techniques are used to depict the benefits and problems associated with our need to belong and feel included within the social group. This universal characteristic regardless of culture and location is borne out in research studies related to sociology, education, health, psychology and politics.

Our sense of social inclusion or exclusion colours the way people see themselves and their world. In a comparative study of text, notions of 'belonging' or 'not belonging' help students to evaluate the significance of context, values and attitudes within a range of textual worlds created by various composers. Students are also better equipped to reflect on their own level of connection as a responder to the world of the text.

The integrated, conceptual approach offered by an Area of Study helps refine understanding of the contradictory and often enigmatic forces that define our identity.

Examining a range of texts within an Area of Study approach can help develop:

- response and composition skills that are needed to effectively analyse textual integrity by examining individual qualities and stylistic features
- interpretive understanding about how varied notions of belonging or not belonging are conveyed in different texts in different ways.
- evaluate similarities and differences between texts in terms of themes, structure, language and overall style
- experiential understanding of the role played by a sense of 'belonging' in the formation of identity and personal relationships, drawing on the student's personal response to texts
- perceptions of how a sense of belonging or not belonging is influenced by the integration of factors such as culture, race, place
- understanding of the positive and negative forces that shape an individual's perception of themselves within a community context
- appreciation of the impact of migration and physical dislocation on perceptions of self and the world at large
- acknowledgement of textual 'voices' and 'readings' that challenge audience expectations, values, attitudes and outlook

The Language of Belonging

Students need the right sort of terminology to discuss the complexity of ideas thrown up by any conceptual study. The following terms help define the positive and negative consequences associated with issues of inclusiveness and exclusivity that are key components of any study of the concepts relating to 'belonging'.

Useful Vocabulary Terms

Belonging	Non-Belonging
Acceptance	Alienation
Accord	Animosity
Affiliation	Antipathy
Allegiance	Anxiety
Alliance	Bitterness
Association	Defiance
Camaraderie	Disaffection
Community	Disagreement
Companionship	Disassociation
Devotion	Discrimination
Duty	Dislocation
Fealty	Disorientation
Fellowship	Disparity
Fidelity	Displacement
Harmony	Dispute
Homogeneous	Dissension
Inclusion	Disunity
Kinship	Enmity
Loyalty	Frustration
Privileged	Hostility
Refuge	Incongruity
Responsibilities	Insecurity
Rights	Isolation
Safety	Mutiny
Security	Rebelliousness
Solidarity	Resentment
Stability	Seclusion
Union	Sedition
Unity	Segregation
	Uncertainty

Defining Belonging

He drew a circle that shut me out
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in

Edwin Markham

Collective fear stimulates herd instinct, and tends to produce ferocity toward those who are not regarded as members of the herd. Bertrand Russell

Being human signifies, for each one of us, belonging to a class, a society, a country, a continent and a civilization. Claude Levi-Strauss

Family traditions counter alienation and confusion. They help us define who we are; they provide something steady, reliable and safe in a confusing world. Susan Lieberman

In union there is strength. Aesop

Sticks in a bundle are unbreakable. Kenyan Proverb

We may have different religions, different languages, different coloured skin, but we all belong to one human race. Kofi Annan

All types of identities, ethnic, national, religious, sexual or whatever else, can become your prison after a while. The identity that you stand up for can enslave you and close you to the rest of the world. Murathan Mungan

I am not an Athenian, nor a Greek, but a citizen of the world. Socrates

The universal brotherhood of man is our most precious possession. Mark Twain

There are realities we all share, regardless of our nationality, language, or individual tastes. As we need food, so do we need emotional nourishment: love, kindness, appreciation, and support from others. We need to understand our environment and our relationship to it. We need to fulfil certain inner hungers: the need for happiness, for peace of mind — for wisdom. J. Donald Walters

The web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together. William Shakespeare

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! Bible

Union gives strength to the humble. Publilius Syrus

A chain is no stronger than its weakest link. Proverb

Man may be defined as the animal that can say 'I', that can be aware of himself as a separate entity. Erich Fromm

Practically everyone now bemoans Western man's sense of alienation, lack of community, and inability to find ways of organizing society for human ends. Jean Baker Miller

We were born to unite with our fellow men, and to join in community with the human race. Cicero

We are driven by five genetic needs: survival, love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun. William Glasser

By building relations we create a source of love and personal pride and belonging that makes living in a chaotic world easier. Susan Lieberman

Belonging to oneself—the whole essence of life lies in that. Ivan Sergeevich Turgenev (1818-1883)

In all cultures, the family imprints its members with selfhood. Human experience of identity has two elements; a sense of belonging and a sense of being separate. The laboratory in which these ingredients are mixed and dispensed is the family, the matrix of identity. Salvador Minuchin

The conflict between the need to belong to a group and the need to be seen as unique and individual is the dominant struggle of adolescence. Jeanne Eilum

The greatest thing in the world is to know how to belong to oneself. Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592)

Your identity is what you have committed yourself to. You build meaning into your life through your commitments — whether to your religion, to your conception of an ethical order, to your family, group or community, to the rights of others, to unborn generations. John Gardner

To thine own self be true. Polonius, Hamlet

Belonging is the universal compassion and wisdom that Tibetan monks speak of. Professor A. Fuller

Hunger, love, pain, fear are some of those inner forces which rule the individual's instinct for self preservation. Albert Einstein

It needs the whole village to raise a child. African Proverb

The Oxford Dictionary defines the word 'belong' as follows:

- Be rightly assigned or appropriate to as an adjunct, function, duty, etc.
- Pertain or relate to
- Be connected with as a member, part, inhabitant, dependency, etc.
- Be related or connected; be naturally or rightly placed; be classified.
- Be a member; fit a specified environment, not be out of place.

Belonging is the complex process whereby perceptions of self and social allegiances are forged. As an essential factor in a person's growth and development, it is virtually impossible to single out any single definition for the term 'belonging'. It colours *who* and *what* we are and how we fit into the world around us. Personal, social and cultural identity become integrated in any appraisal of what this gerund really means. The need to 'fit-in', to belong with others is common to all humanity, crossing all geographical and cultural boundaries. As the famous 19th century poet John Clare observed; "Self-identity is one of the first principals in everybody's life."

Within varied contexts, personal experience can trigger change in our sense of 'belonging' and transform outlook, self-esteem and ideas linked to personal identity. Levels of connectedness with family, authority figures, friends or peers change over time and can be positive or negative. Duties, expectations, responsibilities and functions are often associated with stages of growth or maturation and the ramifications of *belonging* or *not belonging* are frequently addressed in literary texts. Composers often focus on ideas relating to:

- nomenclature, appellations, names
- personal integrity
- social values and attitudes
- historical and social context
- the significance of physical or cultural place
- social class
- cultural identity
- migration
- role of the family
- personal relationships
- social expectations
- introspection
- enlightenment
- maturation and rites of passage

Belonging is a fundamental need

*Every beast loveth his like and every man loveth his neighbour.
All flesh consorteth according to kind, and a man will cleave to his like.*

Ecclesiasticus 13.15

The Ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle referred to this basic drive, suggesting "the impulse to form partnership of this kind is present in all men by nature". Contemporary social psychologists echo such observations; describing man's need to belong and to be socially acceptable as intrinsic and genetically dictated. Scientific research has found that man's need for companionship is a pre-coded instinct located in the primitive brain or amygdale.

Mankind is a tribal species and as such, the 'herding' instinct is part of our physiology. It is as intrinsic as our 'fight or flight' reflex, which is triggered by chemicals sweeping through the brain and body when any serious sign of danger is perceived. Since primitive times, mankind's chances of survival against starvation, predators and enemies have been increased by our banding together. Sociologists and psychologists have observed, that the adage, 'strength in numbers' seems hot-wired into our psyches.

Genetic factors such as the extended period of helplessness of human babies, has made social groupings such as family absolutely necessary. Co-operation has been an essential element required in nurturing and protecting our young, in turn influencing a range of cognitive, emotional and behavioural responses. Any perception of straying from the herd, abandoning family or group can trigger an instinctive reaction which explains our deep yearning to "belong" and to be socially acceptable. Professor A. Fuller (1996) states that, "it is the sense of belonging that bridges the gulf between isolation and intimacy. Without a sense of belonging lives feel empty and pointless, and people become expendable".

Human behaviour and psychological theorist Abraham Maslow developed his now famous five layers, hierarchical model of human needs. This showed man's instinctive desire to be part of a larger unit or community. This desire for inclusion is prompted by a psychological need to associate with and be well regarded by our peers. This yearning is only outweighed by the physiological needs of food, sex, sleep, shelter and safety. The socialisation process through family, kinship or community groups, begins at birth and continues throughout life. It serves to instil customs, traditions and value-systems and can be overt or subtle. Such social and cultural perceptions can be actively enforced or tacitly understood but they help develop personal identity and our sense of belonging to place, culture, nation or religion. Within a community context, this pattern of enculturation generates a sense of allegiance and acceptance. As a result, knowledge, energy, talent and skills are maximised for the common good, helping to build cohesive stability.

Physically, emotionally and intellectually therefore, mankind needs companionship. Apart from those very few true recluses who seek out solitude, the vast majority of people desire becoming associated with and accepted by those around them. Inclusion typically denotes safety whereas social rejection or exclusion signifies danger or a sense of inferiority or

unworthiness. In contemporary society, emotional well-being is being recognised as an increasingly important issue given the serious social consequences of individuals who perceive themselves as victims of rejection, isolation and ostracism.

The Benefits of Belonging

- Acceptance within a community generates a sense of 'us' as a distinct group, different from 'others' who exist outside.
- Communal membership is empowering at both the personal and collaborative level, "I" becoming stronger because of the added security and reassurance of being part of "we" and "us".
- Collective identity constitutes a shared knowledge, understanding and identity.
- Collective strength often wins out over individual vulnerability.
- A collective culture shapes individuality and allegiance, generating as researchers McMillan and Chavis have found, "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together."
- Diverse areas of social research, including urban planning have demonstrated that attachment to place often has positive ramifications such as emotional connection and personal resilience.
- Connectedness to each other or group or place helps nurture self-esteem and confidence.
- "The home place becomes the place of comfort and security, care, concern and commitment, and the place in which the personal meanings of home become tied to the individual's concept of self." (Feldman, 1990)
- Research demonstrates that people who feel included and have rich and diverse social networks, tend to be healthier, happier and longer-lived than people who are physically or socially isolated.
- Clearly defined borders and/or codes of acceptable behaviour can foster stronger personal identity and sense of self.
- Adherence to shared ideas, attitudes and behaviours can also make decision making easier and lessen stress while affirming socially endorsed values.
- Community based moral and social responsibilities, either explicitly stated or inferred, offers clear directions for correct, ethical or justified behaviour
- Collaborative endeavours can often be more productive with goals more readily achieved.

The Negatives of Not Belonging

Social Rejection

- Social rejection, exclusion or stigmatising of one kind or another has been shown to seriously affect a person's sense of well-being.
- A sense of 'belonging' can be transitory. Levels of acceptance or non-acceptance can vary as individuals move from one stage of their life to another. This can generate insecurity and a desire for re-integration into the dominant group.
- Groups such as the disabled, the elderly, immigrants, refugees or anyone perceived as "different" or "other" can often be made to feel shunned and scorned.
- Social outcasts suffer psychologically and emotionally, no longer feeling valued.
- Any form of rejection from human fellowship can have serious consequences on both a social and personal level.
- Studies by sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists of those who perceive themselves as socially alienated or victimised, show an increased level of anxiety, rebelliousness and tendencies to violence and general anti-social behaviour.
- When anger and frustration become sufficiently heightened, those who see themselves as socially rejected, persecuted, are prone to strike out at the group or the forces they feel are responsible.
- Circumstances can enforce involuntary adherence to group ideology or behaviour. This unwilling compliance can cause moral dilemmas.
- Power can corrupt the moral legitimacy of any social authority. Dictatorial control tends to favour niche groups rather than benefitting the whole community.
- Conflict situations can polarise opinions, leading to choices having to be made about which group to side with. This can generate social divisiveness.
- In an attempt to counter the negative impact of individuals or groups within society having a sense of disenfranchisement and disaffection, governments around the world are devoting extensive financial and welfare resources into preventative strategies.

Non-Compliance

- There are those who choose to separate from the dominant group or culture. This decision can be based on personal reflection or experiences.
- Those who feel 'out of step' and disaffected often find the stratified codes of social behaviour, rules and laws too rigid and repressive.
- Others find the pressures for conformity and uniformity too stifling. There is a reluctance to allow their individuality to be subsumed by group identity

- For other self-imposed exiles, personal codes of right and wrong make them challenge the status quo, resulting in their withdrawal from society on moral grounds. Personal integrity might be seen as being tarnished by allegiance to a group whose ideals they cannot condone or continue to comply with.
- Some rebellious types see their desire for independence and individuality limited by adhering to traditions and social expectations.
- Idealistic, morally principled individuals may challenge the authority of what they see as oppressive, tyrannous or unjust.
- Those with a strong sense of self may find social limitations onerous or unjust.
- People may come to resent being imposed upon by others who see themselves as the custodians of social authority or in some way superior.
- Mob mentality is often dangerous and ungoverned. Non-conformity and a decision to leave the group can be triggered by a refusal to be seen as a willing party to such negative group activity.
- Group identity can, at times, offer little encouragement or enrichment of a person's individual talent. Those wanting a personal voice may choose to disengage themselves in order to follow a more individual path in life.
- Cultural groupings may lead to ghettoization.
- Utopic visions of a community-based society may in fact become a dystopic reality for those who recognise what has been lost and shun the benefits of belonging.
- Whether outcast or rebel, Erich Fromm's observation holds true; "The alienated person is out of touch with himself as he is out of touch with any other person."