

ENGLISH: *SKIN*

It is difficult to possess a sense of belonging when we are unsure of our own identity.

As human beings, our species is engaged in a continuous quest to acquire a sense of belonging. Despite our individual traits, the desire to find acceptance is mutual. However, it is difficult to gain the approval of others if we are unsure of ourselves. The paradox of belonging is that while we yearn to be accepted for who we truly are, often “identity” is a product of our standing in society; rather than an innate defining factor. Whether it be through the language we learn to speak, the gender-specific clothing we are instructed to wear, or the social standards and morals we are expected to maintain, it is undeniable that external pressure is a significant determinant in the journey of self-discovery. Although a great portion of who we are is determined by our genetics, identity is an externally contested construct; and as observed in the case of Sandra Laing, without such discovery, ascertaining one’s place in a community is challenging.

The notion of “belonging” is not a destination, nor a rigid path which has been predetermined by our chromosomal inheritance. As expressed in the aphorism by Greek philosopher, Heraclitus of Ephesus, “the whole flows as a river”. Heraclitus believed that nothing was constant in the world, except for the tendency to change; as fire lives the death of air, air lives the death of fire. As such, factors of one’s identity that may seem fixed at birth are not necessarily so – hair colour is often dyed, and there was a time when left-handedness was brutally extracted from society. Take, for example, research conducted in the 1980s by University of Minnesota psychologist Thomas Bouchard and geneticist Lindon J. Eaves, to test hypotheses regarding what is moulded by life’s pressures against what is inborn. Bouchard and Eaves observed the fate of sixty pairs of identical twins raised separately, and encountered cases of individuals who developed as a product of their environment. The “identical strangers”, Oskar Stohr and Jack Yufe – separated at six months of age – are a prime example of the ascendancy of culture in forming one’s identity. By the time they reunited in their fifth decade, Oskar had been raised as a Catholic in Germany and joined the Hitler Youth; while Jack was Jewish and had lived in the Caribbean. Despite physical resemblances and similar mannerisms, these individuals – and many other reunited twins – were strangers by every conceivable definition. While these siblings are genetically identical, it was their concrete individual identities which proved to be the defining factor in their respective searches for belonging.

Without such sense of identity, individuals find difficulty in establishing where they belong. Mark Haddon’s novel, “The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time”, tells the story of seclusion experienced by 15 year old protagonist, Christopher Boone. Christopher is a remarkably intellectual child – with a photographic memory and uncanny fascination with mathematics. However, he experiences difficulty in attaining a sense of belonging. Due to his tussle with Asperger’s Syndrome, Christopher is incapable of understanding emotions and misinterprets social cues – hindering his ability to connect with others. The apex of Christopher’s identity crisis is the fact that his self-concept is incongruent with how others see him; being the victim of patronising labels, he believes, “Everyone has learning difficulties, because learning to speak French or understanding Relativity is difficult, and also everyone has special needs”. Christopher defines himself by what he knows, rather than by more common and age-specific social indicators – such as the clothing he wears or the music he listens to. Essentially, his flair for mathematics allows him to reach the conclusion: “Prime numbers are what is left when you have taken all the patterns away... They are very logical but you could never work out the rules”. In this way, by distancing himself from the material patterns of identity, Christopher is unable to navigate through the social rules of belonging.

Mental disorder is only one of many barriers to the formation of one’s identity. The film, “Skin”, explores the concepts of race and nationality in light of self-discovery; specifically through exposing the perverse exploitation of institutionalised racial classification. Permeated by the injustices of post-World War Two apartheid in South Africa, Sandra Laing – an apparently black child born to white Afrikaners parents – is the target of a ludicrous system in which fundamental, unwavering notions do not necessarily coincide with reality. Designed to protect and preserve what was

believed to be purity, apartheid was established by the South African National Party and effectively legalised racial segregation between the white Dutch and the Indigenous population. Telescoping time by moving from the election of Nelson Mandela to Sandra's transition into adolescence, the film sympathises with a child whose unique racial identity is challenged by a social and political sphere that is unable to comprehend her. Sandra's white identity is conferred upon her by her parents despite her appearance, and she has no reason to question her place in society until she is enrolled in an exclusive boarding school. Here, her matriculation is challenged by tormenting social resistance to her very identity; as quoted by her Headmaster, "She doesn't belong here". Sandra's struggle is a manifestation of the punitive consequences of institutionalised prejudice. Throughout the film, Sandra is reclassified from white to black and vice versa on multiple occasions – demonstrating the absurdity of attempting to define one by the colour of their skin.

Exemplified through the presentation of Sandra's parents, Sannie and Abraham, as disillusioned essentialists – they continually support and defend a callous system despite its gradual disintegration of their family – external pressure can blind one's formation of identity. Interpersonal aspects of identity are negotiable; one may choose many apparent families throughout their life, observed as Sandra elopes to Swaziland, and some may feel that their real self may be perceived as inadequate and hence adopt a false persona. In itself, this can be detrimental to an individual's psychological wellbeing. Arguably more damaging is the pressure associated with body image. According to Australia's Better Health Channel, 45 per cent of women and 23 per cent of men in the healthy weight range believe they are overweight, as well as at least 20 per cent of women who are underweight. These poor self-evaluations lead to physical illness, depression, and the incidence of eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa; undermining one's passage to becoming a balanced individual. Solitary can be painful, yet belonging often comes at its own price. This suggests that self-actualising needs come secondary to social needs – including those associated with belonging, love and acceptance. Such theory is substantiated by American psychologist, Abraham Maslow, in "The Hierarchy of Human Motivation"; which places the desire to belong subordinate only to basic physiological and security needs, whereas self-awareness and personal fulfilment reside at the pinnacle of the hierarchy. Concisely, Maslow's theory is that belonging is not only more valuable than, but also exclusive to, the concept of identity.

In conclusion, identity is an abstract and perpetually acquiring concept which refers to that which we recognise in ourselves, as well as that which others may recognise in us. While confusion about one's sense of self can undermine their ability to belong – as in the cases of Christopher Boone and Sandra Laing – identity can alternatively be the result of a facade one puts on to be accepted. Essentially, although the desire to belong is a natural aspect of the human psyche, maintaining a sense of self in a world of endless pressure to conform is the climax of personal fulfilment.

Statement of Intention:

I have chosen to present my context piece in regards to the prompt, "It is difficult to possess a sense of belonging when we are unsure of our own identity" in the form of an expository essay; that is, a systematic and in depth exploration of the stimulus material. I decided to form my response in this manner as I believe it to be the most conducive way to form a comprehensive analysis of the protean and manifold ideas associated with identity and belonging.

My target audience for this piece is VCE students studying the context of "Identity and Belonging", or educated adults with interest in this area. As this group possesses familiarity with the concepts I discuss, I have used sophisticated language, psychological theory and unconventional ideas, with the intention that readers may depart with a greater understanding and appreciation of the mosaic-like model of identity.

Throughout my piece, I have drawn on a myriad of sources and texts to convey the notion that while confusion about one's identity can hinder their recognition of their place in society, identity can alternatively be the result of a façade one puts on in order to be accepted. Such sources include (but are not limited to): aphorisms from the Greek philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus to introduce

the concept of identity as a processual and abstract idea; the text, “The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time” by Mark Haddon to encourage the audience to sympathise with cases of those victims of social marginalisation associated with identity crises; as well as statistics from Better Health Australia to provide my response with objective evidence.

The set stimulus was the film text, *Skin*. Unmasking the punitive social consequences of institutionalised prejudice during apartheid in South Africa, this film follows the true-life events apparently Indigenous Sandra Laing. I have chosen to draw on aspects of this film which exemplify the barriers self-actualisation experienced by Sandra, such as the quote from her Headmaster, “She doesn’t belong here”, to substantiate my argument that identity is an externally contested construct. However, I have omitted to discuss the influence that categories of knowledge have on the interpretation of Sandra’s unique racial identity. For example, in the film, a researcher of genetics offers a view contrary to that of society, which while is heard impartially by a court, challenges the conventional knowledge of ordinary people. This concept was not discussed as it may have undermined my argument that the largely unwavering social resistance that Sandra encounters is a determinant of her inability to ascertain where she belongs.

Ultimately, my intention in writing this piece was to consider both cases where a concrete sense of self (or lack thereof) determines whether or not one belongs, in contrast to those where the desire to belong jeopardises notion of self-discovery.