

ENGLISH - AREA OF STUDY

Area of Study- Belonging: As You Like It

Belonging can be defined as a state of being which, on the most generic of levels, is the result of connections to people and places being established. Despite differences across texts, specifically the social, personal and cultural milieu in which they are composed and received, these 'connections' are conveyed as the catalyst to moulding an individual's identity whereby one experiences inner harmony and happiness, notions synonymous with belonging. Shakespeare's play *As You like It*, Kirsten Sheridan's film *August Rush* and Bob Randall's picture book *Nyuntu Ninti* explore the vitality of this concept via portraying the benefits of its presence and also, the detriments associated with its absence.

As You like It portrays the fundamental purpose of the natural world as one of moral education which transforms characters enabling the restoration of inner belonging. Utilisation of pastoral literary convention enables the juxtaposition of the Forest of Arden against courtesan life with 'painted pomp' and superficial sycophants. Oliver, a courtesan, initially approaches the forest with malicious intent which has been moulded by his negative court surroundings and such hatred consumes and prevents him from experiencing happiness. He is selfish and void of familial, platonic and romantic relations that could provide him with a sense of identity and moral righteousness. Imagery of wild lioness and serpent mirror his predisposition, feral and combative with intent to harm his brother. The 'green and gilded' snake which wreaths itself around Oliver's neck reflects his rapacious side whilst the lioness displays tooth and claw, this metaphor harkening the backstabbing actions of Oliver. However, he is saved from these beasts by his brother Orlando, Arden staging this event to propel a positive change in Oliver to wake from 'miserable slumber' and realise that one cannot attain happiness at the expense of another. Bestial imagery of 'icy fang' and 'churlish wind' furthers how the elemental forces of nature can act as a purgative process laying bare Oliver's virtuous nature that has been calloused by court life. His enlightenment immediately results in the establishment and renewal of familial and romantic relationships which provide a sense of inner belonging and happiness within him. Unlike the court which is bound to regulations and conformance, Arden presents a morally pure realm which embraces individuals and renews them by granting them self awareness that strengthens their individual sense of identity and thus, level of belonging.

Just as Arden catapults individuals away from negativities and toward strengthening individual identity, *Ninti* portrays the significance of establishing a relationship with the land that can act as a focal point for belonging. Persona Randall sits wearing a content and happy face, the image contextualising the text 'When I see her, I feel as though I'm home'. In contrast to *As You like It*, Randall is explicitly aware of the positive power of the natural environment which, rather than serving as a source of personal enlightenment, connects spiritually with the aboriginal people to provide them with a strong sense of cultural identity. This positive connection to land is furthered via the gentle integration of Randall and the bush landscape implying the unity of man and environment as one. The isolated sentence I belong here is visually the closest to the salient centralised landscape shot of Uluru. This icon represents earth and that his connection to land allows him to feel a simultaneous strong sense of self and culture.

Simplistic and complementary earthy hues invite the responder to feel the profoundness of the land and essentially experience the persona's sense of belonging. Furthermore, nature is personified as 'family' and 'mother Earth' to parallel this ideal connection to strong familial relations and, like Arden, nurture growth and diversity. The concept that 'being alive connects you to ever other living thing around you' and thus one is 'never, ever alone' is augmented in the image of an old man in meditative and reverent pose, eyes closed in apparent barrenness. This visual antithesis allows the responder to realise that this spiritual connection to land allows them to feel an empowering sense of self through their cultural identity and as a result, experience belonging even in the absence of other people.

The absence of familial relations invariably has a significant impact on the extent to which individuals can experience belonging. The main conflict within *As You Like It* arises from the capricious banishment of Duke Senior by his own brother, Frederick, that ultimately stems from jealousy of power. Such political denigration is the first form of social disorder and thus an ambience of belonging is absent. This conflict is underscored by the antagonistic relationship of brothers Oliver and Orlando. Submerged allusion to Cain and Abel places their relationship into a biblical context, Shakespeare inviting us to consider fraternal envy displayed via spiteful outbursts 'I hate nothing more than he (Orlando)' as the manifestation of an adamant struggle for identity. The absence of brotherly love results in both individuals experiencing intrapersonal disharmony as they lack strong filial links that can ensure individual stability. The ideal sibling relationship is embodied through Rosalind and Celia whose cousinly love contributes to a strong experience of interpersonal belonging that provides the essential foundations for strong women capable of holding their own in a patriarchal court of chaos. Celia symbolically parallels their relationship to 'Juno's swans' suggesting they are bound together as beasts harnessed together. 'Swans' also represent the eternal and faithful love they have for each other that culminates a sense of belonging that sustains a harmonious relationship. In juxtaposing the familial relationships, Shakespeare allows the responder to understand the necessity of sibling relationships in creating a sense of individual strength and identity and belonging that is void of turmoil and hatred, factors which disrupt inner harmony.

Rush, like *As You Like It*, re-iterates the importance of familial relations in moulding an individual's identity and their experience of belonging. Though the absence of familial relations doesn't give rise to hatred or dissension as depicted in *As You Like It*, focus on the aesthetics of a mother and child's love in their physical separation accentuates the necessity of familial connections in ensuring inner belonging. Protagonist August defies, 'I know they're out there somewhere', his childish optimism relative to the clarity whereby he has identified the inherent connection he shares with his long lost parents. It is this implicit and underlying love embodied within the orphans mind and soul that drives him to firmly believe that 'if he learns to play the music' that 'they would find him', his identity established and place in the world cemented. As the proximity of August and his parents physical connection draws closer, Sheridan employs thematic use of music to parallel this climatic stage with the intensified level of love and belonging they both intuit. Contrast from cacophonous and dissonant sounds depicting the enigmatic state of August and mother Lyla in the absence of each others presence to euphonic and exuberantly toned music as they reunite in the finale, eyes bright and face jovial stresses the importance of familial relationships in determining an individual's sense of happiness and harmony which is concomitant with their strength of identity and thus sense of belonging.

While belonging is a fundamental concept connecting all of humanity, an individual's sense of self has a great impact on their understanding of themselves and their place in the world. These notions are explored in William Shakespeare's play, *As You Like It*, Kirsten Sheridan's film *August Rush* and Bob Randall's picture book *Nyuntu Ninti*.