

I for isobel
demonstrates that the
strongest human
desire is to belong



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For a large portion of the novel, Isobel drifts through life believing intensely that the key to her happiness is belonging- that if she is a part of a crowd, if she is accepted, she will be “ normal,” and it is this goal on which she focuses a vast amount of her energy. This desperation to belong is manifest in many heartfelt efforts- her deep concern with social propriety, her determination to be liked and accepted in the boarding house, her resolve to become a part of the university crowd, and later in her passive participation in casual sexual activity. However, as her attempts to assimilate herself continuously falter, she gradually develops the resilience to survive on her own. By finally confronting her past and resurrecting the lost part of herself, she gains the freedom to be satisfied with herself and less concerned about acceptance of others. While I for Isobel may suggest that the strongest human desire is to belong, it concludes with the message that true contentment lies in self-acceptance – in a sense, belonging to oneself. Isobel is filled with an acute sense of “ longing and a sense of exile,” stemmed from a childhood-instilled belief that she is not “ real,” not a “ member of the human race.” As a child, Isobel perpetually finds herself as the outsider of the family, outnumbered against Margaret and Mrs Callaghan’s alliance, who share “ contemptuous knowing glances” at each other, enjoying “ well-known joke(s)” at Isobel’s expense. Similarly, after her mother’s death, Isobel embarks on her own life alone, while Margaret makes her home with Aunt Yvonne, a new family dynamic neatly encapsulated in the image of Margaret and Yvonne sitting together in the taxi “ like as mother and daughter” while Isobel sits beside the driver, distinctly segregated from the comfortable, loving relationship in the backseat. As she grows older and experiences new social situations, Isobel finds herself unable to understand <https://assignbuster.com/i-for-isobel-demonstrates-that-the-strongest-human-desire-is-to-belong/>

the casual interaction of young people, wondering in awe “ Was it dialogue? Were they acting in a play?” and reflects that “ people spoke poetry,” millions of different secret languages filled with euphemisms, metaphors and references that Isobel simply cannot comprehend, building an impenetrable barrier that closes her off from interaction. She soon finds that the workplace is “ like school, therefore endurable, but disappointing,” leaving her once again distinctly separated from the people around her. Even with Aunt Noelene conversation is often awkward- there is no real closeness, and both are “ relieved when the phone r[ings],” and breaks the uncomfortable silence. This sensation of being locked out and isolated, of being conspicuously abnormal, causes Isobel to strive to find acceptance in every environment she finds herself in, declaring to Frank that all she wants out of life is to “ be one of the crowd” and live by the “ eleventh commandment” - “ Thou shalt not be different.” In hopes of achieving this goal of conformity Isobel constantly frets about social propriety, always pausing to check herself and consider what “ the right behavior” would be, chastising herself for blindly overstepping conventions and strongly commanding herself: “ right behavior first.” However, this deep concern with conformity to social convention causes her to become trapped in a position of obedient passivity from which she cannot escape. She becomes something of a “ domestic pet” to Mrs Bowers, with the constant “ offer of a cup of tea that she did not know how to refuse.” In addition, as she finds herself in environments whose conventions she doesn’t understand, Isobel’s attempts to remain socially proper invariably falter, causing Olive to chastise her for inappropriate behavior in the workplace. “ It really isn’t right for you to be so familiar with Frank,” Olive says, “ ...and if you wouldn’t laugh at Mr. Richard so much... <https://assignbuster.com/i-for-isobel-demonstrates-that-the-strongest-human-desire-is-to-belong/>

These things are more important than you think." These comments leave Isobel confused and dislocated, wondering incessantly what she has done wrong. She " wishe[s] to know where she went wrong" and is unable to understand her blunders, but she has no guidelines, no one to elucidate the rules of social propriety to her. Inherently lacking the ability to perceive and understand the unspoken rules of society, Isobel is never truly able to belong there. As she begins her new life at the boarding house, Isobel's desperation to be accepted and cherished is revealed not only in her desperation to be noticed by the younger boarders, but subconsciously in her determination to be Mrs. Bowers' " favoured child," striving for a new family dynamic in which she is included and loved. Isobel is " delighted to be included in the games young people played" as she participates in playful banter with Norman, intensely flustered with happiness (" excitement...making a fool of her face") at even the smallest sliver of attention. Being noticed allows Isobel to believe for a moment that she is normal, interacting with boys in the casual, confident way that she sees other girls do. However, when her attempts at flirtatious teasing come across harsher than she intends, Isobel realizes that she simply does not know how to play this game correctly. Finding Norman's gaze " fixed on her, tense and dull with hatred" is something of a turning point in Isobel's attitude towards the boarding house- she realizes that she will never quite belong, and, perhaps to prove this point, from here onwards she finds " no sympathy anywhere." The boarders become increasingly " hostile" towards her, a cruelty which Isobel describes as " the very kind of bitchery I most detest." However, while Isobel knows that she does not belong, she cannot understand what she has done wrong. " This is when I worry," she laments, " when people dislike me and I don't know why." The <https://assignbuster.com/i-for-isobel-demonstrates-that-the-strongest-human-desire-is-to-belong/>

child within Isobel, the “ idiot in the attic” who “ played its games with the real world...behind Isobel’s back” uses the boarding house as a chance to make up for always being the victim in the Callaghan household, striving sub-consciously to be Mrs Bowers’ favourite child. Her “ sucking up” to Mrs Bowers reflects her intense need to belong in a family, a yearning for the mother that she never had. Despite her desperate attempts to suppress it, this need has remained with her, lurking constantly in the back of her mind and weighing her down, expressed concisely in Isobel’s mind through the syllogism “ idiot wants a mother. Idiot can’t have one,” finishing with the weary conclusion, “ Life is very difficult.” Isobel reflects, “ You left the house thinking of freedom...but you didn’t go on, you went back. To fight the old fight and this time to win...to be the favoured child.” By taking the place of Madge, Mrs Bowers’ real daughter, Isobel has unknowingly done what she was never able to achieve as a child, yet she realizes now that being the favourite is no better a position- this is not love, this is not closeness, nor even a sense of true belonging; she is merely playing the role of the meek and obedient “ domestic pet,” accepted not for who she is but for her dutiful passivity. Realising this, Isobel abandons her efforts to belong in this surrogate family, finally defying Mrs Bowers by helping Madge and effectively exacerbating her dislocation in the household in the process. Isobel is distinctly isolated but no longer cares; she is no longer even trying to belong here. When Isobel encounters the university crowd, she is entranced by their intelligence and what she sees as the wonderful freedom and sophistication of their existence, and is determined to be one of them. She watches them yearningly, wistfully thinking “ that was living as she longed to know it. Did they know how lucky they were?” When she summons <https://assignbuster.com/i-for-isobel-demonstrates-that-the-strongest-human-desire-is-to-belong/>

the courage to approach them, Isobel quickly becomes “intoxicated by their attention,” feeling that she is “really alive now.” Her desperation to be accepted is evident as she imperatively urges herself, “she must entertain, she must be a success,” and she is willing to “offer up anything that made them laugh,” even if it means using Mrs Bowers, who has at this stage offered Isobel only kindness and compassion, as an object of ridicule, feeling that “making them laugh might make her acceptable.” However, Isobel gradually comes to the realization that “no matter how willingly they accepted her” the overwhelming sense of being “somehow disqualified, never to be truly one of them” remains. Although she is welcomed amiably into the group- she is allowed to sit with them in the café and follow them around- there is no real evidence of any warmth or connection binding her to them. Even with Trevor, while the reader can see from the special attention he pays her that he has some interest in her, Isobel is unable to truly give herself to the friendship- she remains too guarded to ever really permeate the distance between them. Isobel only consciously realizes the troublesome extent of this distance when Trevor tentatively attempts to turn their relationship into a romantic one. As she struggles frantically from his embrace, “it was her body that fought, not she,” and though she later contemplates the “vanished prospect of being Trevor’s girlfriend,” of belonging somewhere, she knows instinctively that sacrificing her own integrity and sense of self for the sake of conformity is not possible. “She was what she was and nothing could change her, so best to be done with it,” for not matter how much she pretends to be somebody else, “in the end you would resurrect yourself.” Isobel eventually relinquishes her ambition to belong in the group, acknowledging resignedly that “she did not belong with

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them, though they had not shut her out," reflecting her instinctive sense of the impossibility of conformity. Isobel's search for belonging later manifests itself in her involvement in meaningless sexual activity with virtual strangers, striving to behave as "normal" young people do such that she too might become normal, accepted. When Michael cantankerously asks her why she "does things like this," Isobel is forced to think about what she is doing. She notes about herself that "you like to join the human race on the only level you can manage... putting on an act" of what she perceives as normal behavior. However, going through the motions does not make her like everybody else- as hard as she tries to fit in with social norms, Isobel never truly belongs in this sort of situation. She knows that this is not a pursuit of love. While it is possible that she may have initially thought that physical intimacy might bring her emotional and mental intimacy, she now knows that the connection between love and sex is "dubious" and is no longer fooled by romantic ideas of sex as a manifestation of love that she has undoubtedly read about. As she reflects, "oh lyric love, half angel, half bird, or 99% bird," she recognizes, somewhat despondently, there is nothing magical or beautiful about this experience; it is a bird, not an angel. She receives no physical pleasure from it ("even on that level you can't join the human race") and in fact finds the whole experience somewhat "funny," describing it as "groping about in the dark," clumsy, humorous and devoid of any enchantment. Observing their behavior detachedly, Isobel comments bemusedly "it was a bit sad really...working and moaning and gasping together in the dark...avoiding all signs of love, and what they had in common, the map of the mind and dislike of their bodies not to be spoken of," a social critique of the whole absurd process of casual sex, astutely <https://assignbuster.com/i-for-isobel-demonstrates-that-the-strongest-human-desire-is-to-belong/>

aware of all the ironies and the innate meaninglessness of it. Thus, even as she participates in such things, Isobel remains an outsider, watching human interaction with bemused curiosity, but never truly belonging. Isobel gradually comes to realize that finding comfort and belonging within herself is more important than belonging with others; that before she can ever be accepted, she must first accept herself. The burdensome weight of her past and her excruciating sense of being inadequate and worthless severely prevent her ability to value herself and feel comfortable in her own skin. Thus in order to quell some of the “ currents and undertows” threatening to engulf her, Isobel must actively challenge the past rather than simply suppress it- she must face her problems, surrendering to the “ door held straining against memories” and taming the “ dogs of the past always yapping at her ankles” before she is able to move on from them. Eventually, Isobel decides to visit her childhood home, bravely confronting her painful memories and laying some ghosts to rest. In doing this, Isobel develops a “ new tolerance” for her childhood self, learning that she should not regard herself with such harsh contempt, commanding: “ Isobel Callaghan, pick on somebody your own size.” She realizes at long last that her childhood trauma was not her fault, but rather that she had been horrendously mistreated by her parents, “ two murderers” who destroyed her sense of self-worth. As she rages, “ bastards, bastards, bastards! Spiteful, tormenting bastards!” she is finally able to achieve some closure over her past, an understanding of what has happened to her, thus finally liberating her sense of self. With this new freedom from the tight, restricting cordons of the past, Isobel is free to discover her purpose in life, to understand and accept who she really is. Reflecting on Mrs Adam’s comment that “ I was so thrilled with <https://assignbuster.com/i-for-isobel-demonstrates-that-the-strongest-human-desire-is-to-belong/>

that little poem of yours...it's the little poem that brings [her cat] back more than the photograph," Isobel realizes that her writing has value- something that she has produced has affected another human being profoundly.

Recognizing at last that " there's a writer in there...a naked infant greased and trussed in the baking dish with an apple jammed in its mouth," Isobel is finally able to release the " poor little bugger," liberating herself just in time, before the baking dish, struggling baby and all, is plunged into the burning oven. This realization is empowering, enlivening. Isobel gains a definite sense of self as she understands, " I am a writer, I am a writer," a revelation that she declares is " the happiest moment of [her] life." Isobel " knew she could choose to be a writer," firmly and powerfully demonstrating her ability to take control of her existence, to survive in the world as her own person, no longer needing to rely on the acceptance of others. Through her own active discovery and acceptance of herself, Isobel is able to endure her struggles, and to emerge from them as a stronger, more independent individual. She has finally found a sense of belonging- while she remains segregated from the people around her, her sense of self and affirmation of her worth have been restored, empowering her with the realization that belonging to a crowd is dispensable as long as she belongs within herself.