

How is the concept of belonging represented in peter skrzynecki's poetry? essay s...

[Sociology](#), [Identity](#)



Belonging to one's self is essential in order to belong to humanity. It is a sense that can only be achieved through embracing one's own identity, despite popular believe that we must change ourselves and adopt the traits of mainstream society in order to belong. As illustrated in Peter Skrzynecki's Immigrant Chronicle poetry, having a strong sense of self-knowledge & understanding – and a deep connection to one's own culture, beliefs and values – develops a feeling of belonging to and knowing one's self, and in turn, a strong sense of belonging to humanity. ' Feliks Skrzynecki', ' St Patrick's College' and '10 Mary Street' all support this thesis and position the reader to consider the concepts of belonging from the perspective of someone who feels alienated, excluded and alone.

The poem ' Feliks Skrzynecki' tells us of Peter's father, his life, and his clear sense of belonging. It explores the concepts of familial, cultural and self-belonging, and reveals the regretful feelings of Peter, in relation to his alienation, his family's migration and the filial bond with his father. The clear and possibly most significant message of the poem is that belonging comes from within, and requires an accepting and peaceful attitude. These concepts are expressed through the use of poetic devices and language techniques, which show the differences between the attitudes of father and son. The admiration Peter has for his father is evident in the first line -“ My gentle father.” The use of the word ' gentle' introduces Feliks as a kind, peaceful man, and the possessive pronoun ' my' can suggest a sense of ownership or the yearning to be associated with Feliks. The father's independence and emotional self-sufficiency is evident in the first stanza - “ Kept pace only with the Joneses of his own mind's making”.

The reference to 'The Joneses' is important to consider, as it not only refers to mainstream society, but Australian mainstream society. It shows that Feliks is at peace with himself and has retained his own cultural beliefs, despite being pressured to assimilate and adopt a new way of life, and in result, has a strong sense of belonging. The repeated reference to Feliks' garden shows his compassion, connection with nature and dedication, and also his willingness to work hard. It signifies something that belongs to him, in a foreign and unfamiliar world. Throughout the poem, ideals of language are discussed. This shows language as a factor of belonging, and that it can be seen as a potential barrier that prevents the development of belonging. The language indifference between father, son and the community illustrates this barrier, and presents cultural identity as a concept of inclusion and belonging. As the distance between Peter and his Polish heritage grows, Feliks accepts that his son, growing up in Australia, cannot adopt the same sense of cultural belonging that he has. While Feliks is at peace and accepts the unavoidable, Peter has a completely different attitude.

He feels a strong sense of regret and affliction towards his past, and feels that if only he had embraced his Polish culture, he would have belonged in his family. However, this is not the case. Peter felt isolated because he failed to form a strong connection with his inner self, not because he adopted the Australian way of life. As Peter has not developed a strong sense of self-belonging, he does not feel at peace, and does not realise that the cultural indifference and eventual complete disconnection between father and son was inevitable. Peter Skrzynecki expresses feelings of regret throughout the

poem, which can reveal he does not truly understand the concept of belonging. His father's beliefs and circumstances provide a contrast to Peter's perspective and suggest that the poet's reflection of his childhood and adolescence is not relative to the concepts of truly belonging – that acceptance and self-sufficiency lead to a strong sense of belonging to one's self, and therefore, to humanity.

Peter realises that to truly belong somewhere or with someone, you must firstly establish a strong sense of self. In addition, Peter's regret indicates a yearning to belong – to his family and culture. This disconnection is evident in the third stanza, as we learn of Peter's detachment from his father's Polish heritage, illustrated in the line “ I never got used to” and with the use of an ellipsis to suggest uncertainty, doubt and deep thought. It appears that Peter Skrzynecki has become more familiarised with feelings of isolation and alienation, than feelings of completion and belonging. This shows that without a sense of belonging to one's self, belonging to humanity is impossible.

“ St Patrick's College” discusses Skrzynecki's feelings of isolation at school. It provides a reflective account enabled by hindsight and his experience. It reveals his feelings that erupted from migration, alienation and not developing a sense of belonging until much later in life. The overall theme of the poem is Peter's failure to assimilate despite the years he spent at school and that, ironically, it was not until after school that Peter feels he truly learnt anything. This theme is established through the use of techniques such as repetition, symbolism, and imagery, which help to create and

maintain a sarcastic, mocking tone. The first line of the first stanza - " For eight years" - would indicate routine and familiarity. However, this idea is contradicted in lines six & seven of stanza three, where Peter describes himself as a " foreign tourist", which would indicate feelings of being lost in a strange, unfamiliar place.

The word ' tourist' could also represent Peter's feelings of isolation in the way that a tourist is an observer and is on the outside, looking in. The poet's attitude towards his school uniform - a well-known indication of belonging to a group - shows his disrespect for the school. This is emphasised by his mockery of the Latin motto embroidered onto his shirt - he sticks pine needles into the stitching and remarks that he " thought it was a brand of soap." The motto ' Luceat Lux Vestra' actually translates to ' let your light shine', which is again referred to in the last line, proving it's significance. Peter's careless attitude towards the motto shows his lack of understanding, because he has contempt for the school. The motto is emblematic of the hypocrisy prevalent at the institution: it claims to be inclusive, protective, embracing, when, for Skrzynecki, it brings fear. He has not explored the concepts of self-knowledge and self-belonging, so therefore does not value what the motto is suggesting.

' Letting your light shine' means embracing your own identity, and as Peter suggests in the last five lines of the poem, without embracing your own identity, you cannot feel self-sufficient and cope with alienating circumstances that can prevail at educational institutions. As Peter did not belong to himself, St Patrick's College was not " for the best." The repetition

of the line “ For eight years” emphasises the words to prove their significance. This has the effect of suggesting that even after eight years, a substantial amount of time, Peter still felt isolated at school. The eight years Peter spent at school appear almost like a prison sentence. A statue of the Virgin Mary is referred to twice in the poem. Meant to act as a welcoming figure at the entrance to the school, the statue instead makes Peter feel afraid and anxious.

The line “ unchanged by eight years weather” indicates that even after almost a decade, the statue remains unwelcoming and a figure of fear for the poet. The last four lines show Peter’s dissatisfaction and yearning for approval. The reoccurrence of his mother’s superficial choices can be seen as Peter blaming his mother for his poor experience at school. Belonging is dominantly represented in the poem by showing Peter’s isolation and exclusion. The idea that belonging cannot be achieved without embracing one’s self is supported as Peter tells the reader how his mother’s desire to conform and fulfil societal expectations has led to his feelings of unhappiness, insecurity and uncertainty.

The poem “ 10 Mary Street” focuses on describing the home of Peter’s family and the sense of belonging it provides. It presents different concepts of belonging, conveyed through representations of people, relationships, places and family. In the first stanza, a key represents a sense of comfort, ownership, power and control, and also a sense of continuous routine. The key symbolises these things - ownership of the key leads to ownership of the home, which leads to ownership of a true sense of belonging. The poem’s

constant references to the house as a symbol of belonging support this idea. As the house will soon be pulled down for industrialisation, any feelings of contentment and security will be lost. The repeated use of the reference to a key towards the end of the poem suggests a different feeling of uncertainty, disconnection, discomfort and disruption, as after the house is knocked down, it's key will be useless, and therefore powerless.

A familial atmosphere of love, care and nourishment is created using poetic devices. The simile " Like adopted children" and hyperbolic " Bursting at the seams" imply that Peter's parents provide their son with much love and care. The cultural heritage of the family is emphasised in stanza four, with reference to cultural and social aspects such as food, alcohol and cigars/cigarettes. The lines " heated discussions and embracing gestures" show the family's passion and strong sense of belonging to their culture. The personification of the house - " The house stands in its china-blue coat" - provides the reader with an image of a strong, stoic and, perhaps even, noble house. Giving the home human characteristics can also position the reader to view the house as emotive, giving and receptive - the family has a strong connection with the house, almost as though it is part of the family.

The use of parentheses in the third stanza "(the whole black has been gazetted for industry)" could be considered ironic, as parentheses would indicate extra and unimportant information, but the text in the poem proves to be fairly significant, and outlines a major event in the lives of the family. An important message of this poem is that the family will once more feel as though they do not belong, continuing the constant struggle faced by a

family forced to dismiss what leads to self-belonging, and living in a country where they feel as though they do not truly belong. These families, like Peter Skrzynecki's, are often met with the challenge of fighting exclusion, and remaining true to their culture and to themselves – which, in essence, is the key to belonging.

Peter Skrzynecki's poems ' Feliks Skrzynecki', ' St Patrick's College' and '10 Mary Street' convey a strong sense of belonging by exploring the concepts of not only feeling accepted and allied, but also displaced and insecure. The idea that belonging to one's self is essential in order to belong to humanity is proved relevant to Peter's experiences through childhood and adolescence. By exploring the concepts of belonging and considering the impacts of migration on a human being, Peter Skrzynecki's poems help to further develop our understanding of belonging in relation to social, cultural, economic and familial circumstances.

Bibliography – Imigrant Chronicles, By Peter Skrzynecki