Context: Identity & Belonging

Text: *Wild Cat Falling* by Mudrooroo

**A List of Important Quotes from the text**


**Release**

One

P1 Today the end and the gates will swing to eject me, alone and so-called free. Another debt paid to society and I never owed it a thing.

P10 “You haven’t been with those dirty Noongar kids I hope?” (mother)

p15 After solitary the prison accepted me as I had never been accepted outside. I belonged.

Two

P17...after being born at the bottom of the world to find I have worked myself up such a long way. I frequent the best bodgie handouts now and sleep with white girls if I want them – great kicks...

P20 “I want to go over to the East and become someone.” (Wildcat)

P22 We are the I-don’t-care-a-damn-mob. We fake it when we can’t make it.

P25 I want to pound on the locked gates and demand to be let in again...

**Freedom**

Three

P29 I guess the fact is I’m afraid of life, haven’t got the guts to be a real criminal.

P30 It was against regulations to forget my punishment among the stars.

P31 While I was inside some zealous prison worker asked me if I knew where I was going. I said a ticket was put into my hand when I was born, but if it had a destination, well, time had smudged the ink and so far no collector had come to clear the matter up.

P31 No-one spares a glance for the half-breed delinquent, and this is how I want it.

P35 I am king of the castle on the highest mountain in the world.

**Four**

P39 “I’m one of the permanent unemployed unemployables. No rich family to bludge on either.” (Wildcat)
"In jail I graduated in vice and overcame my last illusions about life. Now I know that hope and despair are equally absurd." (Wildcat)

"I never plan ahead. I just wait for life to happen to me." (Wildcat)

"Prison was the only chance I had of three meals a day and a decent bed." (Wildcat)

"From outcast native to big time bodgie. Success story." (June)

The lazy, grateful rubbish people, who refuse to co-operate or integrate or even play it up for the tourist trade.

Five

There just the two of us against the world.

I cry because I am scared. She [my mother] cries because she knows I will be taken away from her.

I sob and cling to her. Nothing will ever be all right now. I have been tried and found guilty. And I am already nine years old...

Six

bodgies description

Seven

Damn Denise and everything that makes me weak and contemptible.

Once I get to the main road I will know my way home like a cat.

I have no hope and no ambition but I have trained myself to be self sufficient, self controlled, and I am in this way superior to the world of struggling, deluded fools of which these people are a part.

Eight

But then I suppose I'm not what they call Australian. I'm just an odd species of native fauna cross-bred with the migrant flotsam of a goldfield.

Most native boys I know start their jail education by being put in under a drinking charge, but I bet half the Uni boys in her are under twenty-one...I don't see anyone challenging them.

I listen to their bull-dust questions and I hear myself make the sort of answers they expect...
Nine

P79 I wonder whether I still consider myself a member of this bodgie element. I don’t want to belong to them anymore. They are a pack of morons.

P80 If I let up a minute on my mental discipline it creeps in again suggesting that there might be something in life besides absurdity – even a hint of meaning. I have to shut it out because it is a liar. It is the most dangerous illusion of all. Except maybe love!

P82 He feels belonging in this dark, not like in the day, outcast and naked.

P89 The master race, and all that crap. Got to show this girl they can’t put it over me. Walk out on her when I like.

P90 “Got to believe in something.../Not God. Things like freedom, equality, rights of the common man.” (Girl at party)

P92 “Nothing is right. Nothing is wrong. Everything exists in itself and by itself. All things are separate and alien from each other.” (Wildcat)

Return

Eleven


Twelve

P107 “I ran into a University mob, thought they might be OK but they were a worse fake than the bodgie gang – only rich enough to get away with it.” (Wildcat)

P107 I feel the old hate rise up in me like a fanned fire.

P109 He’s real keen now and I guess I have to go through with it.

P111 I have a swell feeling of power now. Not a puny human weakling anymore. Sort of god-like and the engine roaring out my strength at the world.

Thirteen

P113 No ties any more, not even to my mum.

P118 God how I struggled to harden my spirit to [the prison’s] misery. Told myself I didn’t care anymore...one place much like another – all dreary and all drag. Prison a refuge of a sort where I was nearer belonging than anywhere.
Fourteen

P122...but that side of my heritage must be kept from me at all costs. I must live white and learn to think with a white man’s mind.

P123 [Mum] had it coming to her, pretending to be better than the rest of the; keeping me away from them, giving me over like a sacrificial offering to the vicious gods of the white man’s world.

P123 [The Noongar] have a warmth and loyalty to each other and a sort of philosophy of life the whites will never know or understand. We would both have been better off if we had stuck with them.

P125 He looks at me quietly and I feel he is reading my whole life from my face. Everything, as long back as I can remember, even before.

P125 Not judging me, only seeing how I am.

P130 I have told myself so often that I wanted to die, but I guess it wasn’t really true. I’ve always wanted to live. It was just the God-damn way life always went for me that made me decide it was futile and absurd.

P130 And now when there’s nothing to look forward to but the long-drawn-out misery of trial and punishment, I want to live more than I ever knew before.

P130 I even feel I might know just a little how to live.
Context: Identity & Belonging

Text: *Wild Cat Falling* by Mudrooroo

*A Brief Summary of the Text*

The narration by the protagonist occurs over the three days and two nights that follow his release from Fremantle prison for petty crimes. He has been behind bars for 18 months and comes out thinking he is “separate and alien” from everything and everyone around him. He lacks a sense of purpose in his release, not knowing where to go or what to do with his freedom. He only knows he needs more than his prison money to pay rent and eat but has no intention of working. He calls himself “Wildcat” because of a dream he had as a child of a cat free-falling toward the ground rushing up. He senses in this a certain doom of not being able to escape his fate. Being half-caste and a juvenile delinquent he is overlooked by society, and though he thinks that is how he likes it, it is really not what he wants. He needs to belong and to matter. Despite his cynicism on the value of life, he wants to live. This he discovers when it is too late, when he encounters his full blood Aboriginal great-uncle in the scrub behind the town; at this time he, however, is on the run from white law and certain return to prison.

To begin, the exit process from prison is sketched. As this happens, Wildcat remembers the first time he was found guilty, as a nine year old, for breaking and entering and stealing a “pretty dress” for his mother. Wildcat gives some detail about his upbringing with his single Mum, an Aboriginal who married a white man and lived in a government house. She was very proud and refused to acknowledge the nearby “dirty” “rubbish” Noongar tribe or any Aboriginal ways, bringing up Wildcat to “think like a white man”. Part Two, Freedom, traces the story of Wildcat as he sits on a beach in Fremantle and starts a conversation with a girl, June, a university student who is normally not his type. His usual type is the bodgie gang’s slut, Denise whom he meets later that day, only to get drunk and in his words, “rape” her that night. Meanwhile June has asked him to visit her and her friends on campus the following day. This he does and after talking intellectual rubbish with them finds them fake, although he doesn’t let on. They do have with them an artist, Dorian, who is gay and asks him to a party that evening. While waiting for the afternoon to pass, Wildcat has a reflection on the existentialist Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* that has left a great impression on him. At the party, Dorian is offended by Wildcat’s suggestion of *A Queer World* for one of his paintings. Wildcat leaves the party after a girl tries to seduce him.

In Part Three, Return, Wildcat first reflects to the time of his most recent trial in which the white, stale and supercilious judge got the court to mock Wildcat for their amusement. While he is sitting having a drink, still the same night as the party, he feels a hand clap on his shoulder and turns to see his ex-prison friend Jeff. Together they plan the future. Wildcat has a revenge robbery in mind on his home town. This is also practical as he is running out of money. Jeff is a bit slow-witted and is in awe of wildcat. Because of this hero worship, Wildcat feels obliged to go through with the robbery. They steal a sleek car and some guns and drive 100 kms that night to the town. As they commit the robbery a guard discovers them. Fearing for his life and not wanting to return to prison, Wildcat panics and shoots; the
guard falls. The two robbers flee; Wildcat where he knows will lead to open space, Jeff to “the wrong way”. Wildcat does not know whether the guard is alive or dead. He thinks he will possibly hang if caught and realises how desperately he does value life after all. As he flees in the scrub behind the town, he comes across the Blackfella his mother always warned him against. But the old Aboriginal rabbiter slows him down, gives him food and water and bids him sleep a while under shelter. He reveals that he is a blood relative, his great uncle by birth being his mother’s uncle, as well as in tribal law. He tells him his mother is now ill and dependent on the Noongar community that she once despised. His way of seeing right into Wildcat has a twin effect: it makes him feel deeply ashamed but also gives him a sense of belonging, of his heritage and hence of his own identity at last. He is connected after all. But the white law is chasing him. He leaves his uncle, but decides to stop running and to face the music. As the white policeman talks to him, and Wildcat asks whether the guard he shot is alive, Wildcat is surprised to let himself see a hint of compassion towards himself in the white man’s eyes. He meekly holds out his wrists for cuffing.

874 words
Context: Identity & Belonging

Text: Wild Cat Falling by Mudrooroo

An Analysis of the Characters in the novel

"Wildcat"/narrator

The narrator/protagonist is a half-caste Aboriginal boy of eighteen and a half. He is edgy, cynical and lost. He thinks of himself in terms of a “wildcat” linked to falling dreams he has had as a child. Wildcat has grown up in poverty on the outskirts of a country town in Western Australia, with a single mother who has lost her other children to white Welfare Officers. As a nine year old, Wildcat steals to provide his mother with a pretty dress and is found guilty and sent to a boys home.

As the account opens he is being released from an eighteen month jail term for petty crime. As a teenager he has been one of the “bodgie” gang of drop outs who meet in a local pub; on his release he finds they bore him and he no longer fits in. Looking for a fresh identity, he also investigates some new university friends, and a gay artist, but he finds them all “fake”. Girls from both sets try to seduce him but he is not very interested.

He is only out of jail for two days when he realises he needs money to eat and pay rent. He meets a friend, Jeff, from jail days and plans to rob his old home town where he experienced so much hatred and hurt, especially at his old school. He is scared and does not want to go back to jail; when the robbery goes wrong and he fires a gun at a man, he thinks he will hang. Although he has been cynical about the value of life to this point, he suddenly wants to live. He has a further epiphany on the run from the law when he encounters an old Aboriginal rabbiter who is his great uncle. This man does not judge him, and seems to understand him. Through him, Wildcat gets a glimpse of his real identity and has a brief but deep sense of belonging. But the white man’s law demands punishment, and he is caught and returned to prison.

Mum

Mum is an Aboriginal woman who marries a white man but is left with several children to bring up on her own. The white authorities take all but Wildcat away from her, for reasons unspecified. Through wildcat, we learn that she is very proud and doesn’t want to belong to her own Noongar people, as they are “dirty” and poor and live like “rubbish” in camps on the outskirts of the country WA town. Mum won’t let wildcat play with the Noongar children, and instils fear of the old black rabbiter into Wildcat, when in fact that man is only her own uncle.

When Wildcat first steals, Mum is broken as knows she will lose him too. The uncle, met by Wildcat as he flees, tells Wildcat that his mother is old and now living in the Noongar camp, sickened and with little time to live.
Mr Willy

Mr Willy is the second white lover of Mum. He is older, about 60, and chops timber in the bush for a living. He is kind. One day when Wildcat is small he takes him with him and Wildcat is permitted to climb to the top of a hill where he feels like the king of the mountain.

Blackfella

Blackfella is actually Mum’s real uncle, both by blood and tribe. Out of pride, Mum refuses to acknowledge him and instils mistrust of his presence in the young Wildcat. When Wildcat is fleeing from the law some fifteen years later, he comes across the uncle in the bush. This man steadies him, gives him shelter, water, food and a place to belong. He gives Wildcat a sense of his own true identity at last.

June

June is the white university student Wildcat chats up on the beach when he is fresh out of jail. She does not condemn him, and finds his views on life interesting though somewhat questionable. June invites Wildcat to meet her university friends the next day as she thinks they will find him curious.

Dorian

Dorian is one of June’s friends. He is a gay artist and student, and a fan of jazz. He is intrigued by Wildcat’s ability to understand the psychology of his paintings, not realising that, as Wildcat says, he is just talking about himself. Dorian asks Wildcat to a party and wants his advice on a title but is offended by Wildcats’ suggestion of “A Queer World”.

Frank and Bill are Social Anthropology students at uni.

Denise

Denise is the girl at the bodgie club with whom Wildcat gets drunk and has sex when he wants to. He paid her the first time, and doesn’t care for her. On the first night out of jail he is sexually violent with her. He sees her as one of the “morons” of the bodgie gang he no longer needs.

Jeff

Jeff is Wildcat’s “prison-redeemed friend” and not too bright. He meets up with Wildcat at a cafe and the two talk of future plans. Wildcat explains his long-held revenge plan to rob his home town. Jeff is in awe of Wildcat and so Wildcat feels obliged to “go along with it”. When the robbery goes wrong, Jeff runs the wrong way to escape; Wildcat runs the other to open space as he knows the town backwards.

Mr Robinson is the long suffering, podgy probation officer who says condemning things to the Magistrate about Wildcat, not protecting him at all.

The Magistrate is an example of a typical white, supercilious, over-educated judge with a jaded interest in proceedings. He uses the case for his own amusement, getting the court to mock Wildcat.

963 words
Context: Identity & Belonging

Text: Wild Cat Falling by Mudrooroo

Prompt One: An Imaginative Response

'A person's healthy sense of identity depends as much on their possessing a sense of belonging to themselves as it does on belonging to others.'

As I lie still, drifting to sleep under the old man's blanket, my nostrils fill with the smell of the rich, dark red earth beneath me. Out here, in this scrappy bush on the outskirts of town, I feel safe, though I know the white police are tracking me down. Time to stop running and face the music. The old fella has been kind to me. Gave me tucker, good rabbit stew too, and cool, clean water that burnt my throat all the way down. No questions; he understood all about me with just one piercing look. More than I know about myself. He said he recognised me and I was the son of his niece by blood and by law. So he was my great uncle! And then I had looked hard at him. He was the old fella, even way back then, who roamed around the bush when I was just a young 'un. My Mum had warned me off him, saying he was dangerous and a magic man, scaring me stupid. He's off again now; probably gone to get the authorities. Have to rest; I've been on the go for thirty hours now. But now I begin to understand.

***

My mother comes to me in my dream. She's crying and sheltering me from the police at the door. I am nine. I only stole the dress for her; it was so pretty and she never had one of her own. She's crying because she knows she'll lose me to Welfare, like my brother and sisters before me. But I don't know that: I am only confused and hate the white police for making her cry. Even now in my dream waves of shame and guilt wash over me; not for pinching the dress, but for making her even more miserable than before. I'm all she's got. She's broken all ties with her Aboriginal family since marrying a white man; even though he shot through, we still live in a white government house, we wear white man's clothes, and I go to a government school. Mum tells me not to play with "those dirty Noongar kids" across the fence, but I do anyway: they tease me for being stuck up, and for being half white, but we muck along OK together.

***

I guess I started hating people when they took me away to the Boys Home and they punished me for trying to run away. After that I knew I was really on my own. It was me against the world, no connections, no love, no obligations, just survival like a wild cat. Take what you need, you owe no-one nothing: a man needs to eat. Work? That's for losers. They found me guilty for Breaking and Entering and sent me to Freo as a Juvey for 18 months. But doing
Juvey time was easy: just keep to yourself and keep your wits sharp. Trust no-one and ask no favours. Each of us is separate. We begin and end with ourselves, in a void, waiting for nothing. Outside I’d even earned a reputation among the Bodgies: they knew I was untouchable, unreachable. Do what I like, when I like. There’s no-one going to tell me what to do. And I could have any white chic there anytime I pleased. Inside Freo I played the same survival game. The grey staleness of the stone corridors was just like me: cold to feeling, and endlessly enduring. How endless! Time dragged itself in every second in that void of existence! But I wouldn’t be the screws’ man, and for that I did solitary for fourteen days. That impressed some; such respect has to be earned.

***

The time comes for release. I am sweaty-palmed, nervous of what the outside will bring. There’s nothing outside. There’s nothing in here either, but in here it’s what we’re used to, routine, if ever so boring, brings security. A small group of us put on ill-fitting out-of-date civilian suits. We step forward one by one, are dismissed and taken to the gates. The key turns in the first heavy lock: my heart lurches. I don’t want to go. I really want to stay.

***

So my Mum’s sick now. The old rabbiter told me. He also tells me she’s living in dependency with the Noongar people she despised, just a kilometre or so away from his camp here. They’re loyal to their own kind, the Noongar. It dawns on me as the oldfella speaks that she must be one of them: all that hypocrisy as I was growing up. Something shifts within me, something I can’t at first take in. So I am part Noongar! This oldfella’s full blood Noongar. And he’s my mother’s uncle! Those kids I played with after school could’ve been my cousins! I should go to her, go to family. But I said good-bye to Mum long ago. I’ve chosen to be on my own, it’s the only path of survival. Now I’m on the run, big time this time. I’ve shot a man, maybe killed him. I didn’t intend to. I fired under nerves and pressure. No white guard was going to get me back to jail. Now I might hang. The oldfella seems to know. I’d only done the job from revenge on the old place, the town I hated that hated me. I needed cash to live. Is that really a crime? That girl I met on Freo’s beach when I got out, June, said I should use my brain, go and study. But I wasn’t too impressed with her friends. Pretenders and pretentious the lot of them. I learnt more in the library in the jail. My great uncle is wise beyond the ages. He bids me sleep, to be ready for what comes. “Stop running!” is his message. “You have come home.” And I realise in the last hours of freedom that that I want to live like never before, because at last I really do belong.

1045 words
Context: Identity & Belonging

Text: *Wild Cat Falling* by Mudrooroo

Prompt Two: "Having a strong sense of identity is not always a good thing. It can sometimes cause more harm than good."

Usually it is considered an asset to have a strong sense of one's own identity. It is thought to contribute to a feeling of security, to encourage a positive view of the world and to being easily recognised by others. People who have such firm identities seem to know where they are going in life and how to get there. They often become celebrities, famous for achievements or for simply being themselves. Yet how often do such personalities end up as headlines for all the wrong reasons? And what about the flip side, where people with an entrenched sense of identity may yet still be consumed by negativity? Literature such as *Wild Cat Falling* by Mudrooroo, as well as real life, offers insights into these quandaries.

At present in the press two larger than life figures are dominating the news for their unexpected actions: first, comic genius Robin Williams for his very sad suicide; and second, Wikileaks perpetrator Julian Assange as he prepares to face challenges led into by his unique sense of identity. Williams said of his innate talent that it was dormant until his late teens, when he just discovered he could make others laugh and be very funny. In an interview with Michael Parkinson on the BBC, he said the main reason he made comedy his life's work was because it could broach serious subjects that were too difficult for normal conversation. Immediately after his comments, he gave an impromptu parody of then US President George Bush Junior's as the Western movie star John Wayne, reacting to the butcher of Iraq in the 1990s, Saddam Hussein. As a public entertainer, Williams was expected to be hilarious no matter what the topic. His own problems with cocaine and alcohol addiction, two bitter divorces and depression were not congruent with the strong comic identity he had made for himself. His current wife released a statement revealing he had Parkinson's disease as well; it seems the brilliant entertainer that put the world right and into perspective for so many others could not do the same for himself. Thus in William's case, having such a strong sense of identity has resulted in a dreadful and tragic result.

The second case of identity grip concerns Julian Assange, the Australian journalist who co-founded Wikileaks, and so released thousands of classified US files relating to the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, in addition to classified embassy cables from many countries. Assange has announced he is about to leave his sanctuary of the Ecuadorian Embassy in London due to declining health. To do so he will place himself in danger of arrest for another matter, and ultimately extradition to the US where he most likely faces the death penalty for sedition. Assange has been driven by a deep call to tell the truth as he knows it. He wrote in 2010, "You have to start with the truth. The truth is the only way that we
can get anywhere." He calls on journalists to have to reveal sources and proofs, just as scientists do, and claims "men in their prime men, if they have convictions are tasked to act on them." He says his task to expose the truth as he finds it is "in his nature". But what one individual desires can cause irreparable damage if not well-managed and channelled in appropriate outlets; that is why we have laws especially in a democracy. Although the fallout from Wikileaks was less than expected on the civilian level, it caused political embarrassment between several countries that set diplomacy back severely, in particular that between the US and the Middle East that was fragile at best following the Iraq War and oil dealings. But it will recover; whereas personally, in Assange’s case then, it seems that he may pay literally with his life, either through execution or life imprisonment, for his fierce loyalty to his identity.

A less threatening way of investigating the strength of identity is to let literature lead the way. Far from being famous, yet also bent on a personal path of self honesty is the protagonist of *Wild Cat Falling*, by Mudrooroo. The Aboriginal narrator finds that his understanding of life and his actions also lead, like Assange, to jail. But unlike the creative energies of Williams and Assange, Wildcat’s drive originates from a negative source, that of self preservation in a bleak human landscape of a boys’ home and the prison at Fremantle. He quotes the isolation of the existentialist Beckett and finds he too is “Waiting for Godot”, claiming no-one is connected to anyone or thing. His self defence is so strong that it cannot allow any healing or love to occur; that is until he experiences an epiphany with an old Aboriginal who turns out to be his great uncle. His people, his land, his birthright identity is revealed. As this greater sense of freedom and real belonging overcomes him, he is forced to return to jail. Wildcat’s identity for most of the account is based on fear, on being abandoned and struggling for survival. Because of this past, he is a tough prison loner. But for Wildcat too, having a strong identity has ultimately meant suffering harm to his inner self.

All three cases, Williams, Assange and Wildcat demonstrate that people’s identities can become too strong for their own good. Where a healthy flexibility is not a part of life, identities can suffer under a compulsion to perform at a level that proves dangerous.
Context: Identity & Belonging

TEXT: *Wild Cat Falling* by Mudrooroo

*Prompt Three: A Persuasive Essay*

‘No man is an island,
Entire of itself,
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.’

John Donne

This often-quoted sonnet by John Donne sums up the togetherness of belonging to a community. Moreover, it declares that all humans are linked: that man is the “social animal”. Darwin certainly thought so; he claimed our survival depended upon our interaction. Yet those with such a firm and positive sense of belonging as Donne and Darwin are perhaps blessed in their outlook. Other literature, mimicking life, provides many examples in which the protagonist is not so sure of place, or is even an anti-hero who would disagree strongly with Donne.

From the time we are born, we are dependent on other human beings. There is nothing so helpless as a new born babe who cannot even lift its own head up, cannot feed itself, cannot walk or dress or bathe itself. This dependency builds not only physical bonds, especially between mother and child, but deep psychological and emotional ones. In a famous study carried out in an orphanage, the babies who were nearest the door in their cots and so were picked up most frequently did much better in all areas of development than the poor unfortunate ones down the back who were neglected. The effect of interacting is also positive for the person who picks the baby up. Their face softens into smiles, they make eye contact and they are totally absorbed in the moment, even often making baby noises back to the infant. Thus it is usually a pleasurable experience. Why is this behaviour necessary if mankind is not a “social animal”? What does that mean and what are the implications for us as a species?

In *The Descent of Man* Charles Darwin first described man as a “social animal” in a biological sense. He described the human consciousness as being related to our search for survival, and claimed that this was linked to the development of morality among humans, something animals as far as we know do not have. Darwin thought that parenting played a huge role in laying the foundations for social and hence moral awareness. As seen above, the "social instincts", so readily seen when a baby is around, compel people to enjoy human companionship. The large majority of humans of all ages derive pleasure from each other’s company. Additionally, as our intellect develops, we develop language skills. Our basic biological needs for food and shelter are therefore made easier as we can communicate directly. Even as adults, we cooperate in problem-solving activity with others. As a result of talking and exchanging ideas between ourselves, Darwin thought that we should be able to
determine the best way ahead as a society. In this he links with Aristotle’s 2000-year-old understanding of man as a “political animal”.

But watch the media and the news reports and it often seems that such philosophy, even in a democracy such as ours, is utopian. As criminals strike, they do not have the “greatest good” in mind. What happens to the person who was the orphan not picked up enough? In a novella entitled *Wild Cat Falling* by the Aboriginal writer, Mudrooroo, a similar situation is explored. The protagonist narrator is the half-caste son of an Aboriginal single mother who has lost all her other children to welfare officers. At nine years of age, “Wildcat” is sentenced for stealing a dress for his mother, and also taken away from her to live in a remand home for boys. So begins a life built on hate and an identity built on isolation and fear. Wildcat relates best to the existentialist writings of Samuel Beckett, quoting in the text scenes from “Waiting for Godot” that he has read In “Freo”, Fremantle Gaol. His mantra is one of utter separateness from everyone and everything, of complete independence. The only meaning he can construct is to have none. As he is released from prison he tries to join in with a group of students, and revisits his “bodgie” gang as well. Neither resound with him. Yet Mudrooroo has a surprise for the reader. Wildcat is made to have an epiphany; he realises that he passionately wants to live, and, through an encounter, that as an Aboriginal he belongs both to the land and to the full blood Noongar tribe. Thus Mudrooroo is saying that belonging is vital after all; that to live a life of emptiness is not where we find meaning; that a healthy identity is based on acknowledgement and acceptance if not love.

Hence Donne is right, though not easily or clearly so, despite his sure tone. Life is full of a complexity that his assertion denies because each individual feels their isolation as much as their belonging. This realisation lies behind Darwin’s understanding; if we were not separate individuals, we would not have to be such social animals to survive. The importance of our mental and physical behaviour in this regard starts when we are newborn and continues all our lives. Those who try to exclude themselves from belonging usually face despair, as is often explored in literature. In life and literature, then, a firm understanding of one’s interdependence as a human helps maintain a balanced identity for both the individual and the community.

900 words
Prompt Four: "A person's identity is influenced by the circumstances and events of their life."

An Expository Response.

Nature or nurture? Which is the greater influence on core identity? There can be little doubt that most people's well-being is affected by the fortunes or otherwise of their lives. People's characters too seem to be influenced by everything as diverse as the circumstances of their birth to unexpected events during their lives. But how deep are these influences? Can they affect someone's integrity of being, their core identity, or are they largely circumstantial? Many victims of crime in particular give ready evidence that they have been changed permanently for the worse; and criminals too may feel they have crossed a line into becoming a different person. Such is evidenced in the novella by Mudrooroo, *Wild Cat Falling*. Very rarely, an exceptional individual maintains their integrity in the face of damage; they endure, and even lead others in fights against whatever it was that hurt them.

The saying “born with a silver spoon in his mouth” refers to those born into wealth; often it is thought their identity is somehow part of their wealth, as if what someone owns on the outside can be an intrinsic part of their character. Labelled “snobs”, often without cause, the rich frequently suffer from personal conditions such as deep loneliness and depression despite their assets. Howard Hughes was a famous mega-rich American businessman, aviator and film producer who inherited a fortune at age 19 but became a recluse in later life. What made him renounce his public character despite a life of success, acclaim and wealth? Other actors such as Greta Garbo and Australian Grahame Kennedy also chose seclusion in their later life. What did fame bring that made them alter their core identity from mass entertainer to totally private individual? The answer is more complicated than a simple linear link, but it is clear that life’s events did irrevocably influence the deeply held character of each of these people.

In other cases, individual, unforeseen events can cause a lasting difference to a person’s identity. The degree to which a victim of crime suffers from their ordeals is often outlined in a Victim Impact Statement. It is up to the victim whether this statement is read to the court or not; but legal service agencies strongly recommend such a statement be written down by the victim for the therapeutic good it does in either case. The victim may be the person directly hurt or a family member affected by such things as loss, shock and grief in the case of a homicide or a fatal road accident. The type of harm sustained can be emotional and psychological trauma, loss of life coping skills, of relationship skills, of ability to work and earn a living, of the potential for study and future prospects, and the actual physical damage itself. In other words, all aspects of someone’s life can be affected by violence and crime. How a victim responds will depend on their underlying mental resilience as much as physical
reaction and healing; and this resilience or lack of it is determined by elements of their core identity. In some cases people are shattered for life by crimes against them; in others, even shocking crimes are overcome, and the victims find good in the midst of evil. One who comes to mind is the Pakistani schoolgirl Malala Yousafzai who was shot in the face by the Taliban in 2012, but used her experience to make a stirring speech to the UN on the rights to education of women and girls. In the past, great leaders such as Gandhi in India, Martin Luther-King in the US, and Mandela in South Africa have all risen from the ashes of their personal life experience to lead their peoples.

In what may seem a just equation, the criminal as well as the victim often undergoes an identity shift. A novella written by Mudrooroo, *Wild Cat Falling*, investigates the negative identity of the protagonist, a teenage half-caste Aboriginal boy, and how it evolves. Much of his character is defensive, determined by a damaged upbringing in a boys’ home, where he was taken at the age of nine years old after stealing a dress to please his mother. At 17 he is serving time in the Juvenile section of Fremantle Gaol for breaking and entering. Here he finds prison is “a refuge of a sort” but he is actually deeply scared and miserable, though tough on the outside. “Wildcat” has learnt over his short life to trust no-one, to believe in nothing, to follow the philosophical writings of the existentialist Samuel Beckett. He too is “Waiting for Godot”, for nothingness in life. Although Mudrooroo is delivering a message of criticism against the system for young offenders, he paints it so well that a good impression of the life of a young criminal is witnessed. When “Wildcat’s” sentence is served, he cannot adjust to life outside; he steals for revenge and to find money to live, and shoots a guard when escaping. This makes him real prison material in society’s terms as he is strongly anti-social by this time. The tragic element that Mudrooroo invents is that Wildcat discovers his Aboriginal roots and thus has a reason for positive living immediately before his re-arrest and return to the soul-destroying prison. Mudrooroo’s character is therefore deeply affected by the events his life takes, from the circumstances of his early life to the outcome of his maturing personality.

Thus circumstances and events definitely do have a strong effect on people’s identities, especially if they are sudden and unexpected. However, the resultant change to identity is a gradual process that may take a lifetime to evolve in its fullness. For some characters, this has meant retreating from a previous persona as in the cases of Hollywood recluses; for others, such as many victims of crime, the damage sustained is too great to recover former identities fully. How criminals themselves are also affected is explored in a novella, *Wild Cat Falling*. Finally, in rare situations, individuals rise from the circumstances challenging their identities to conquer them and lead others in victory.