

ENGLISH: LANGUAGE ANALYSIS

Schoolies

Every year, divided social opinion is propagated in the Australian media during the week of end-of-school Year 12 celebrations, commonly known as Schoolies. 2012 was no different, with reports of a reveller sleeping on the balcony of a Gold Coast apartment. Angela Mollard expresses her indignation at the reckless behaviour of the teenage boy Cameron Cox and moralisingly asserts the precious value of life in her open letter (“A letter to an idiot at Schoolies”, 21/11/12) to Cameron, other teenagers and parents. On the other hand, Chris Fotinopoulos’ opinion piece “Poorly performing students are the ugly face of Schoolies” (The Age, 27/11/12) blames the non-academic students for the disorderly schoolies events portrayed by the media. Fotinopoulos’ despondent contention that finishing Year 12 is a worthless achievement for these students resonates with the older generation adults such as Spencer Leighton who was compelled to write his own letter to the editor. In his letter “Finding right place” (The Age, 29/11/12), Leighton earnestly asserts to other adults the need for action and special attention to be given to such disengaged students.

Attention is drawn to Cameron Cox’s life-threatening stunt by Mollard in her personal scathing castigation of his disregard for his own life as she writes directly to him and other like-minded teens. The format of an open letter employed by Mollard is instrumental in conveying her intimate and blunt tone as she speaks directly to Cameron. Other teenagers in the audience may similarly feel that Mollard’s writing is directed to them as well, as they may identify with Cameron, being in the same age group as him. This intimate nature of the piece is epitomised by the constant reference to Cameron as a shortened, informal “Cam”. By using a nickname, Mollard engages with Cameron from the opening “Dear Cam” to the concluding paragraph which she begins with “Cam,...”. This conversational tone obliterates the gap between the reader and Mollard, giving adolescents in the audience a heightened emotional sensitivity, making them more susceptible to Mollard’s emotionally-charged arguments. Her overriding anger is conveyed in Mollard’s scathing condemnation of Cameron and other similar teenagers. She is furiously adamant that “there are problems with selfish, entitled, careless, narcissistic idiots like you”. Not only does the word “idiots” echo her previous sentiments that Cameron Cox is “an idiot at schoolies”, the plural form of the word suggests that risk-taking, unthinking teenagers are prolific in society. In this, Mollard specifically addresses all young adults. The powerful and loaded four adjectives utilised have extremely negative connotations which shock the reader. Labelling the teenagers themselves as “selfish” and “narcissistic” centres the issue on the behaviour and personality of teenagers. This may have the effect of young adults feeling stunned that Mollard is so forthcoming in her frustration or they may even feel guilty for their behaviour. It also creates the impression that Mollard is an angry parent reprimanding them and this is certainly the case. Mollard is an angry parent scolding young people such as Cameron for their dangerous and reckless behaviour, evoking disgrace and regret from such teenagers.

Furthermore, Mollard uses her position and experience as a parent to remind Cameron and other adolescents of the precious nature of life. From the outset, Mollard establishes herself as a parent who has the same maternal instinct as other mothers and parents. Explaining that the photograph of Cameron “chilled every cell of the parent I am” allows other parents in the audience to identify with her and her motherly values. Mollard showcases her maternal first instinct to protect the vulnerable when she illustrates how she “wanted to reach out and pull [Cameron] in [herself]”. Parents in the audience would similarly feel the horror and gravity of the situation when they gaze into the adjacent photograph and may also desire to save Cameron from “[plummeting] to the ground below”. From this point, mothers and fathers sympathise with Mollard, sharing her anger and feeling inclined to wholeheartedly agree with the lesson which Mollard gives to Cameron and other careless schoolies. For the schoolies, the indication that Mollard would be so desperate to stop Cameron from falling, allows them to appreciate to some extent the gravity of the situation and a parental perspective.

This is further enhanced by Mollard's parental overtones in her anecdotes. The unsubdued emotion of the writer conveyed in "my stomach squeezes every time" and "he's gone and all his dreams...were extinguished too" are a vivid reminder for teenagers of the emotional effects of a death on others, especially loved ones. This segues smoothly with her assertion that Mollard is "furious on behalf of [Cameron's] parents". Mollard emotionally appeals to teenagers to understand a parent's perspective. This elicits compassion and shame from the teenagers while generating approval from parents. In this way, Mollard highlights the value of life through displaying the emotional ramifications from a parental perspective which garners agreement from parents while attempting to make teenagers feel contrite.

In contrast to this, Fotinopoulos' opinion piece presents an older generation of adults with the bigger picture of the underlying causes behind the prevalent, despicable scenes of Schoolies. While Mollard draws from her parental experience, Fotinopoulos uses his status as a teacher to alert the older generation of the differences which have arisen in the youth of today. Identifying himself with his audience of older adults, Fotinopoulos creates a dichotomy between modern day students and the adults in terms of partying, explaining that it is these differences which lead to the prolific "teenage party culture" of Schoolies. Fotinopoulos implies that the behaviour of teenagers has changed in his emphasis on "these days" and "yesteryear" when describing financial independence of students. This is complemented by several words derived from a teenage vernacular such as "partying is king", "an all-weekend bender" and "get right away from the folks". This serves to widen the gap between parents and their teenagers, suggesting that adolescents are so different that they almost have a different language. Mothers and fathers also sense a disparity between their children and themselves in the implications of teenagers "who want to get right away from the folks" "without any chance of being sprung by [their] folks". This arouses suspicion amongst parents and creates doubts in their minds as to what their children really get up to when they are away from their parents. By propagating distrust between parents and teens, Fotinopoulos ensures that the older generation of adults have no sympathy for "wild" schoolies. This allows him to emphasise the extent to which poorly performing students ruin the otherwise well-meaning celebrations. Hence, Fotinopoulos crafts a disparaging profile of underperforming teenagers, making the older generation of adults emotionally removed from the selfish attitude of "partying" schoolies.

Following his logical exploration of the reasons behind the "teenage partying culture", Fotinopoulos denigrates the poorly performing students in comparison to their peers, using negative connotations to argue that it is pointless to keep them in school. Prior to asserting the frivolousness of retaining underperforming students until Year 12, Fotinopoulos presents a multitude of statistics which have considerable explanatory power for the older adults. The older demographic is more likely to be receptive to the statistics and appreciate the concrete evidence which back up Fotinopoulos' ideas and arguments. In particular, Fotinopoulos makes reference to the Hawke "policy initiative that led to more students staying on to year 12". This appeals to the older generation as they may also remember this Hawke government policy. Hence, the logical ideas backed up by statistics and historical fact establishes positive rapport with the older adults. After explaining the underlying cause of the problem, Fotinopoulos blames the unruly behaviour of schoolies solely on the underperforming students. This is accentuated by the dichotomy created between "hard-working sensible students" and "borderline toolies". Fotinopoulos quotes from some of the studious Year 12 students in his class to illustrate the success which schoolies can be for some teenagers. From this, the older generation adults feel disapproving of just the underperforming and disengaged students while applauding the teenagers who celebrate their achievements in a responsible manner. The overall distinction of poorly performing students as the scapegoats emotionally removes the audience from "these kids", making the older adults feel justified in condemning the non-academic students. This is summed up in Fotinopoulos' despondent and resigned concluding statement that "school is nothing more than a dead-end rite of passage for a dead-end education". The hopelessness of the situation resonates with the adult audience, affirming Fotinopoulos' contention that it is pointless to keep poorly performing students in school.

Agreeing with Fotinopoulos' opinion piece, Leighton highlights society's obligation to address the needs of these poorly performing students in his letter to the editor which also speaks to the older generation of adults in a realistic and earnest tone. Like Fotinopoulos, Leighton makes sweeping generalizations about this subgroup of students, creating a gloomy profile of them and separating them from the adult audience. Through the label of these students as "pariahs", Leighton crafts a similar profile of the students as Fotinopoulos. However, Leighton extends this by also underlining the detrimental effect of the underperforming students on the studious students. He suggests that other students model their behaviour on disruptive, disengaged students when he elucidates that poorly performing pupils "bring disharmony to classrooms and in general set a bad example". The fact that these pupils may also be damaging to other students puts parents on alert and makes them feel resentful of other students who may endanger their child's education. In addition to this, Leighton paints the picture that schools are unhelpful and unable to accommodate these special students. He insinuates that if schools are unable to adequately meet the needs of underperforming students then it is up to society to have a greater role in determining the students' future pathway. The adult audience also feels obligated to shoulder the responsibility of the disengaged students in Leighton's inclusive "we must engage these students". The community feels motivated to do so following Leighton's solution to the problem of returning to the "old apprentice system". Furthermore, the proposal of returning to the "old" system fosters a sense of endorsement amongst the older generation as they value traditional methods which they grew up with. With a realistic and determined voice, Leighton proposes a solution to the issue which focuses on the underperforming student's development, contending that they do not fit in schools. Leighton ultimately positions the older generation of adults to fulfil their mutual obligation to meet the needs of underperforming students.

The many facets of Mollard's open letter, Fotinopoulos' opinion piece and Leighton's letter to the editor combine to highlight the dangerous behaviour of often-intoxicated young adults celebrating Schoolies Week. Mollard angrily castigates the drunken reveller Cameron Cox for his reckless stunt, using her position as a parent to garner approval from parents while shocking teenagers into feeling guilty for their thoughtless conduct. In contrast to this, both Fotinopoulos and Leighton blame students who are academically underperforming for the violent and unruly scenes of Schoolies portrayed by the media. They both create a distinction between their constructed profile of disengaged students and their older generation adult audience. Despite this similarity, Fotinopoulos and Leighton have contrasting opinions on the course of action to take. Fotinopoulos has a resigned and despondent voice, emphasising the pointlessness of retaining these students in schools until Year 12 while Leighton offers a possible solution. He proposes to return to the old apprentice system, giving young non-academic people a livelihood and a skill. He also hands over this social responsibility to the older adults, calling them to action.