

Extension 2 English Reflection Statement

'Je ne Comprends Pas'

"I'm claiming the right to be unhappy"¹

¹ Huxley 2006, p.240

My examination of ‘Resilience’ was ignited by the suicides of four school acquaintances, the recurring hospitalisation of an anorexic friend, the increasing evidence of self-harm amongst my school peers and the inexorable anguish evident on Facebook newsfeeds. My performance poetry, “*Je ne Comprends Pas*,” is the culmination of research and reflection on the cause and effect of generational differences around resilience. I wanted my poetic voice to interrogate the inscrutable nature of resilience, characterized by the repetition of my title “*I Don’t Understand*” in different languages to exemplify the universality of the problem for today’s youth. The medium of performance poetry gave me a way of connecting with fellow ‘first-world’ adolescents, challenging those on the cusp of adulthood not to enter a ‘brave new world,’ but, a new world bravely.

A new-found appreciation of ‘social realism’ through Tim Winton’s autobiographical memoir, *Land’s Edge*,² and Gwen Harwood’s poem, *Alter Ego*, studied in the Preliminary English Course, offered insight into the way various notions of ‘happiness’ can define our sense of self and how this is an integral component of resilience. The latest Australian Bureau of Statistics³ figures reveal that suicide is the leading cause of death in young adults, with ‘one youth a week’ committing suicide in Australia. A surfeit of ‘resilience building’ non-fiction, including the ‘Resilience Donut’ program⁴, postulate that ‘Bubble wrapping,’ ‘Snow ploughing,’ ‘Helicopter’ parenting of today is denying children the experience of failure that is necessary for building a sense of ‘buoyancy.’ I was struck by the incongruity between the empirical evidence and expert advice of Clinical Psychologist, Professor Trevor Waring at an academic awards ceremony, to “Dare to Fail.”⁵

² Winton 2010

³ Australian Bureau of Statistics 2014

⁴ Worsley & Fordyce 2014

⁵ Waring 2014

Watching mothers hover over their children at my cousin's 6th birthday party confirmed the helicopter-parenting phenomena and further inspired vignettes in my poetry. My study of *Hamlet* in Advanced English and subsequent interview with my grandmother about her mother's experience of living through two World Wars and The Great Depression led me to understand that while "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,"⁶ are a part of the human experience, it is the way we respond to these hardships that is important and appears to be the salient challenge for my generation. The similarity in philosophical thinking between Aldous Huxley, in his futuristic novel, *Brave New World*⁷ and social researcher, Hugh Mackay⁸ who, despite the 80 years between composition, both "*claim the right to be unhappy*,"⁹ stressed to me the importance of having the chance to learn from failure, disappointment and pain. The glorification of suicide in social media suggests that youth today are not claiming this right, but rather seeking a permanent escape. My reading of Sartre's post-war epiphany in Extension 1, "I became aware of the weight of the world and my ties with all others and their ties with me,"¹⁰ led to an existential realisation of mutual responsibility that has resulted in the more fragile mental state of today's youth. Thus, my tone of sarcasm, "You are hot girlfriend!"¹¹ questioned the ironic popularity that accompanies suicide. The purpose of my Major Work, therefore, became threefold: to raise awareness of the notable decline in the value of resilience; to reflect on the possible reasons for this decline and to open a dialogue between generations.

⁶ Shakespeare 2005, Act 3, Scene 1 pg. 105

⁷ Huxley 2006

⁸ Mackay 2012

⁹ Huxley 2006, p.240

¹⁰ Sartre 1946, Existentialism is a Humanism lecture, cited in Kaufman (ed) 1989

¹¹ Je ne comprends pas, p. 2

Alice Sebold's novel, *The Lovely Bones*¹² and Christos Tsiolkas' novel, *The Slap*¹³, depicted divergent human responses to a socio-traumatic experience. I also wanted to use different voices to represent intergenerational differences in thinking. I consequently dismissed my original plan to compose a speech, as I was limited by the conventions of this medium. 'Button Poetry'¹⁴ and American show 'Def Poetry,'¹⁵ in particular Daniel Beaty's, "Knock Knock,"¹⁶ helped me appreciate the immediacy and intimacy that a performance poet has with their audience. I felt this medium would give me a more potent voice to communicate more authentically to my audience of young adults. I hoped my piece would have further appeal to a more universal audience, via a Youtube post.

Inspired by T. S. Eliot's stream of consciousness style in his poem, *The Love Song of Alfred Prufrock*, I wanted to emulate the voice of a girl speaking to her deceased sister expressing her sadness over her choice to take her own life, her fears for her generation, anger at her parents and hope for the future. With this in mind, I researched other forms of dramatic monologues. Robert Browning's *My Last Duchess*, Bruce Dawe's *Weapon Training*, and Sylvia Plaths' *Lady Lazarus*, *Daddy* and *Fever 103*, studied in Extension 1, each showed me a way of manipulating the form to give my poem greater impact. I recognised all the more, the importance of creating an honest, genuine voice. I came to appreciate the value of hesitations, silences, pauses in creating an effective dramatic monologue. The dramatic monologue also lent itself well to the use of the rhetorical question, "Mothering?"¹⁷ as a means of prompting my audience to contemplate and consider.

¹² Sebold 2006

¹³ Tsiolkas 2008

¹⁴ Button Poetry 2013

¹⁵ Def Poetry 2005

¹⁶ Beaty 2010

¹⁷ Je ne comprends pas,p. 4

While committed to the dramatic monologue form, my study of the poetry of Seamus Heaney in Advanced English, in particular, *The Strand at Lough Beg*, drew my attention to emotionally evocative elegies. I identified the way classical elements of this style mirrored the three stages of loss including sorrow, reflection and consolation¹⁸ which could facilitate the layered reflection of the loss of the sister, the loss of a generation's understanding of resilience and the ensuing loss of security my generation feels in a world where we are left to fend to our own devices, ill-equipped to deal with failure, disappointment and loss. My research on elegies also led me to Walt Whitman's poem, *Oh Captain! My Captain!* Whitman's use of the extended metaphor of President Abraham Lincoln offered me a way of introducing the voice of previous generations and of connecting the various threads that wove together vignettes. I was led back to the interview with my grandmother, where clichés were her means of summarising ideas and finding answers. Later, she clarified her thinking by explaining that what I was calling 'clichés' was her philosophical foundation for life: life skills that had been passed down from generation to generation, simply, clearly, succinctly. I realised that what this represented was a generational divide. The sustained use of grandmotherly platitudes signifies the lost language of resilience to my generation, framed by the repetition of my title, "I Don't Understand" in French, German and Italian.

Conscious of missing visual stimulus that sites like 'Button Poetry' provide, I workshopped performance elements of my piece with my HSC 2 Unit Drama class, aiming to maximise the use of my voice as a dramatic tool. This experience enabled a greater understanding of the need to vary shade, tone and volume in my voice to amplify dramatic intensity, with a focus on heightening audience engagement. My drama class allayed my fears that the circus,

¹⁸ Poets.org 2014

helicopter and other sound effects were too distracting, and affirmed the value of a textured soundscape in maintaining audience interest and facilitating meaning.

An unexpected challenge was how to introduce and close my piece in a way that maintained textual integrity. Jonathon Safran Foer's appropriation of Shakespeare's, Hamlet when describing his protagonist's pain in the novel, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*,¹⁹ led me to my decision to include Hamlet's 'slings and arrows,'²⁰ as a way of referencing the universality of life's struggles. As such, I returned to Shakespearean form, appropriating Hamlet's ending, "Goodnight, sweet prince/And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest."²¹ The concision of Emily Dickinson's lament in, *You Left Me*,²² was another source of inspiration. Framing my work with a direct reference to this poem allowed me to evoke feelings of anger in the opening and pathos in the ending. Through a conscious variation in my tone, I could demonstrate the gradual acceptance of the sister's death in the closing lines, facilitating the elegiac quality I hoped to leave with my audience.

The realisation of 'Je ne Comprends Pas' has increased my understanding of this imperfect world. By investigating why there is such a prevalence of depression, self-harm and suicide in today's youth, I gained a richer understanding of the different generational responses to life's 'slings and arrows,' and formulated my own opinion of the complex and enduring nature of resilience. The creation of my Major Work, therefore, facilitates my purpose of raising social consciousness and setting up an inter-generational dialogue founded on understanding and respect of our differences, furthermore challenging young adults to claim the right to be unhappy. Not always, just enough.

¹⁹ Safran Foer 2005

²⁰ Shakespeare 2005, Act III, Scene 1, pg. 105

²¹ Shakespeare 2005, Act V, Scene 2, pg.237

²² Franklin (ed) 1998