

## VCAA LANGUAGE ANALYSIS 2011

The increasing number of people who wear tattoos has caused the body art phenomenon to adopt an entirely new symbolic significance in modern society. In her blog 'street beat', in which she comments on a variety of current social issues, Helen Day, part time journalist and blogger, writes an entry entitled 'the power of ink' (25/3/11) which deals with this issue. Combining a nostalgic tone with one of condemnation as a part of her anti-conformist approach, Day contends that the tattoo has evolved from a historically significant sign of 'deviance and criminality' into an 'ordinary' 'fashion statement' which is meaningless and commonplace. On the one hand, Day preaches to the converted, targeting middle-aged readers who received their tattoos back when its authentic meaning still existed. At the same time however, Day aims to persuade tattoo-wearing youth or those who have considered getting tattoos, that it is no longer a sign of individuality or rebellion, but 'try-hard' conformity. In the 'post a comment' section, followers of Day's blog have responded to certain elements of Day's arguments, as well as to her accompanying photographs which she used to enhance her opinion piece.

Firstly, Day aims to highlight to readers how commonplace tattoos have become. By admitting that 'everyone has tattoos these days; even me', Day aims to illuminate that tattoos are so popular in today's society that even those, like her, who are against this conformity, have been drawn into the phenomenon, aiming to instil resistance in readers who may have considered getting a tattoo. Furthermore, by humorously explaining that she sees more tattoos on 'suburban housewives' than in 'Australian prisons', Day asserts that tattoos have spread from the confines of prisons and other hallmarks of rebellion, into the streets of suburbia, no longer making it significant or representative of individuality. With this, Day aims to deter like-minded, anticonformist readers from succumbing to this new 'fashion statement'. By nostalgically stating that 'the power of ink has diminished' Day aims to instil a sense of longing and disappointment in readers that once again, the modern consumerist society we live in has over-used something to the point that all its 'power' is gone. The title, written in large, bolded, black ink, aims to highlight to readers just how powerful it used to be. Furthermore, by ironically referring to this power as having 'faded...like a tattoo', Day attempts to colour her piece with a touch of humour, appealing to more light-hearted readers. Finally, Day places this portion of her piece alongside the number of 'followers' of her blog, illuminating that while 12,615 people read her material, only 4 people had the courage to 'post a comment' with their view, drawing reader attention to the high rates of apathy and conformity in society today.

These arguments are rejected by Tash, who commented on the blog. Using colloquial, conversational language of the younger generation such as 'rapt' and abbreviating tattoo to 'tatt', Tash contends that one can still be 'unique' and have a tattoo. By providing personal testimony and sharing that 'I designed my own ankle bracelet', Tash proves to readers that 'no-one else has one like mine'. With this, Tash appeals to like-minded youth who feel the strains of peer pressure but still want to remain

'unique' demonstrating to them that tattoos can still be a symbol of individuality and should be 'showed off'.

Secondly, Day traces the role and significance of tattoos throughout history, 'from the earliest of times' until 'these days', aiming to highlight for readers the way it has evolved and 'diminished'. By explaining that in the time of 'the Greeks and the Romans' and then 'in Europe throughout the middle ages' the tattoos 'marked the deviant and incarcerated' and was applied without 'consent', Day paints the tattoo as a symbol of 'trouble' and rebellion. With this, Day suggests that those who wear a tattoo as a 'fashion statement' or for the sake of conformity are disrespectful to those who

endured the application of a tattoo as a punishment. This is strongly reinforced when Day references the tattoos 'still seen in the living flesh' of those who survived World War 2. By insisting that the tattoos can 'still be seen' and coupling this with hyperbolic words such as 'indelible cruelty', Day highlights tattoos as a symbol of 'the horror of genocide' and of the pain 'still' felt by those who experienced it. By doing this, Day aims to deter readers who had considered wearing a tattoo, and to instil guilt in readers who do have tattoos. However, having identified herself as wearing a tattoo, Day avoids taking on a 'preaching' tone, suggesting that she too feels the guilt of wearing this symbol.

This notion of guilt is reinforced by the photograph of 'Ta Moko' and the comment written by 'Kiwi' in response to Day's blog. The visual depicts the arm of a man taken from three different angles, with detailed tattoo art on it, understood from the caption below to be a symbol of status and a story of the wearer's family heritage. The dark, mysterious texture of the image, coupled with the explanatory caption, aim to reinforce Day's assertion that tattoos were once meaningful and serious, positioning readers to see how they have been delegitimised today. This is supported by Kiwi, who juxtaposes the popular saying 'imitation is the sincerest form of flattery' against the assertion that regarding Ta Moko, imitation is 'identity theft', reinforcing Day's view that tattoos are now conformist and disrespectful. Because this is a foreign Maori tradition, Kiwi creates a relatable analogy for readers, 'how would you feel if someone stole your fingerprints', aiming to instil empathy and understanding in readers and reinforce Day's attempt to instil guilt.

Additionally, Day adopts a highly critical tone in drawing reader attention to the human tendency to 'develop a strong sense of satire' 'when something is imposed without our consent'. Day contends that the evolution of the tattoo into a 'fashion statement' that is chosen by the wearer, from a sign of 'ownership and brutality' is a result of this tendency, establishing readers trust through her highly analytical and authoritative tone. By juxtaposing the tattoo, which is a malleable and vulnerable phenomenon that has undergone significant evolution since its birth, against this human tendency which is been around 'from at least the 18th century', Day positions readers to see that the problem is not with tattoos specifically but with human nature. At once, it makes us resent all forms of coercion, but at the same time, it causes us to desire acceptance and therefore conform, unaware that this desire is coercive and debilitating. This assertion is supported by the historical anecdote of the convicts

who began to create their own tattoos and were punished for 'vandalising the property of the Crown'.

Conversely, a point of view that wasn't touched on by Day is raised by 'Dr AB', a medical practitioner, as well as 'cleanskin', both of whom commented on her blog. While Dr AB refers to the medical dangers and pain of receiving a tattoo, cleanskin suggests that art is not meant for the body, 'if you wouldn't put it on your wall...'. With this, both aim to position readers to share their view that regardless of the social and moral implications of tattoos raised by Day, they are not only unattractive as suggested by cleanskin, but medically dangerous and painful.

Finally, Day expresses her own dismay that her tattoo, which was once a symbol of her feminist rebellion, is now shared by 'the British Prime Minister's wife' and is therefore delegitimised. With this, Day targets her youthful readers, warning them that the tattoo phenomenon will evolve yet again, and they will only regret the mark they made on their bodies. This is reinforced by the second photograph with an image of a presumably middle-aged woman's tattooed shoulder against the backdrop of a car and city, with the caption 'no tattoos before you're thirty...what I'll tell my children'. With this, Day calls to fellow middle-aged readers to warn the younger generation of this



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ever-changing, incessantly 'diminishing' phenomenon, from a 'symbol of rebellion' into 'an ornament as ordinary as my skin'.

Thus, Day's blog entry allows her to engage with readers in a discussion on the issue of tattoos in today's society. While some foster medical concerns, and others defend their tattoos as symbols of individuality, Day contends that 'the power' of this phenomenon is no longer what it was. With her nostalgic, yet critical tone, Day asserts that, once a symbol of resistance to coercion, the tattoo has become the face of the coercion which society cannot seem to transcend; the coercion of conformity.