

Thanks for Not Killing My Son

All that is known about Rita Schindler is what she herself says in her letter. It was a student who noticed "Thanks for Not Killing My Son" in the "Have Your Say" feature of the December 30, 1990, Toronto Star. He tore it out and brought it to his writing teacher, exclaiming what a fine argument it was. The teacher agreed. By the time the editor of this book tried to reach Ms. Schindler, though, the Star had discarded her address. None of the many Schindlers listed in the Toronto phone book knew her, and the hospital mentioned in her letter would not divulge information. The publisher even talked with a detective agency. Finally, though, the Copyright Board of Canada gave permission to reprint the letter, as it can do in such cases. The publishers of The Act of Writing, from which book this letter was copied, sincerely believe that Ms. Schindler would want her eloquent and highly principled argument made available to more persons of her son's generation.

1 I hope you will print my letter of gratitude to the strangers who have affected our lives.

2 Sometime between 1:30 p.m., Dec. 8, and 1 a.m., Dec. 9, a young man was viciously attacked - beaten and kicked unconscious for no apparent reason other than walking by you on a public sidewalk.

3 He was left lying in a pool of blood from an open head wound - in the Victoria Park-Terraview area. He was found around 1 a.m. and taken to Scarborough General Hospital where ironically his mother spent 48 hours in labour before giving him birth, 23 years earlier.

4 His mother is angry of course, but thankful for the following reasons.

5 First of all - his eye socket was shattered and haemorrhaging but his eyesight will not be affected. Thank you.

6 His ear canal was lacerated internally from a tremendous blow to the side of his head. The cut could not be stitched and the bleeding was difficult to stop. But his eardrum seems to be undamaged - thank you.

7 He required numerous stitches to his forehead, temple and face but your boots didn't knock one tooth out - thank you. His head was swollen almost twice its size - but Mom knew that his brain was intact - for he held her hand for six hours as he lay on a gurney, by the nurses station, I.V. in his arm - his head covered and crusted with dried blood - waiting for x-ray results and the surgeon to stitch him up.

8 So, thank you for this eyesight, his hearing and his hands which you could have easily crushed.

9 His hands - human hands - the most intricately beautiful and complex instruments of incredible mechanism - the result of billions of years of evolution - and you people used yours to beat another human being. Five guys and two girls to beat one person. Who do I thank? Did you know he was a talented young musician with a budding career - and that playing his keyboards and piano mean more to him than my words can say?

10 And when his friends were talking about revenge, I heard him say, "No, I don't want someone else's mother to go through what mine has." That's who you were kicking in the head. And so - I thank you for not causing the most horrible and devastating thing that can happen to any parent - that is - the untimely tragic loss of a child - at any age.

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11 You could have kicked him to death but you only left him to die, thank you. A person found him and called for help.

12 I am his mother - and I have been given a second chance - thanks to you.

13 I hope that someday you'll have children and love them as much as I love mine - but I wouldn't wish on your child what you did to mine.

Rita Schindler, Scarborough

MENTALLY answer the questions which follow and compare your responses with those provided.

1. Schindler's argument is cast as a letter. For what audience is it meant? The youths who attacked her son? All the readers of The Toronto Star? How well does her "letter" work as an essay?

The essay as epistle (letter) has a long history, with examples such as Alben Camus' "Lettres a un ami Alemand", or, in this country, "Letters to a Quebecois Friend" by Philip Resnick and Daniel Latouche. Camus' "letters," published from 1943 to 1944 at the height of the war, were ostensibly written to a "friend" in Germany but were really a public statement of opposition to nationalism and violence. While the letters of Resnick and Latouche, published in 1990, were ostensibly written from each author to the other, they were mainly essays for the public, illustrating the points of view of English Canadians and Quebecers towards each other and the constitutional crisis.

Schindler's letter does seem aimed at the youths who attacked her son; the writer apparently does not know who they are, and therefore has chosen the device of a public letter to reach them. On a larger level, though, she has produced a powerful essay against violence, a statement not only for the attackers but also the public. It would be difficult to believe she did not have this larger audience in mind while penning her "letter."

2. Schindler organizes her letter by examining in turn each injury inflicted on her son. Point out each. What proportion of the letter's content is given to these examples? Could the point have been made without them?

Probably over half the letter is given to the examples which form the background for Schindler's irony - giving "thanks" that these injuries were not worse. Without these examples, the argument would lose almost all its force, because we could not see how bad the injuries were in the first place.

3. After all her ironic "thanking," Schindler ends more literally: "I wouldn't wish on your child what you did to mine." Is her closing weak because it drops the IRONY, or strong because it caps the point?

What do you think??

4. Six of Schindler's paragraphs have only one sentence. Give reasons. Is this style effective?

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Some of the paragraphs, such as 1, 4, 12 and 13, are short apparently to emphasize and dramatize their content. We might also guess that in general the paragraphs are short either because Schindler consciously realized she was writing for a medium that does employ very short paragraphs (to encourage readers of different levels), or because an editor split paragraphs or even trimmed some content, as often happens. It is the extreme conciseness of the piece that allows such brief paragraphs to work.

5. How CONCISE is this selection? Try to find one passage of deadwood that could have been cut.

You will have a hard time finding deadwood in this letter, made so concise both through avoidance of wordiness and through heightening of the ironic tone.

6. How FORMAL or INFORMAL is Schindler's TONE? Give examples. Does the tone fit the content? Why or why not?

The piece is fairly formal, for example in the places where it refers to the author in third person, in the vocabulary which avoids name-calling or other loaded language, and in the dignified syntax. This formality, of course, strengthens the ironies. Schindler employs the technique of clothing ironic statements in a formality that only increases the impact once we penetrate the surface of their statements.

7. "You could have kicked him to death, but you only left him to die, thank you," writes the victim's mother in paragraph 11. Explain the IRONY of Schindler's "thanking" her son's attackers.

The thanks that Schindler renders after each example of injury to her son are so inappropriate on a literal level that we do not cease to recoil from their ironic impact as we examine the events of that night. Each section also adds more ironies to the effect; for example in paragraph 9 the son's hands, used to create music, were mercifully spared, though the assailants used their own hands "to beat another human being." In the same paragraph the author points out that it took "five guys and two girls to beat one person." "Who do I thank?" she concludes. In fact, there is hardly a line which does not directly impart its irony. "Thanks for Not Killing My Son" is an incredibly unified selection: each section, each statement, works together towards a devastating overall effect.

8. Find and explain at least 10 more IRONIES in this selection.

Since there is irony in virtually every line, to list them all here would be almost to repeat the letter.

9. The author might have called her son's attackers "thugs," "goons" or worse. Would this openly persuasive mode be more effective than the "thanks" she gives? Defend your answer with reasons.

Clearly the ironic approach is more powerful than mere name-calling, which is persuasion at its lowest level.

10. In addition to irony, repetition, fright and climax are techniques of persuasion. How does Schindler use each? Respond with examples.

The constant repetition of the "thanks" has a cumulative effect. It also creates a heightened feeling like that of chants and other repetition in rituals. Fright is implied; if such an

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unprovoked attack nearly killed the son of the author, another could kill children of those who read the letter. Finally, the whole argument rises to a climax in the final point, the ultimate loss to parents, the death of a child (which, though it did not happen, might well have resulted from the actions of the assailants).

11. Does Schindler make her point deductively (through an innate rejection of violence) or inductively (through the many examples she cites, leading to her point)? Can an argument go both ways at once? Would this be a failure of logic?

It would be hard to imagine a parent who would not innately abhor violence towards his or her children, a principle from which to deduce a reaction such as Schindler's. It would be equally difficult to deny that the specifics of this crime - the several examples of each body part wounded, as well as the random nature of the attack- did not also play a part in Schindler's reaction and argument. As in many essays, the logic is mixed - and probably no weaker for it.

12. Does Schindler attempt only to heap shame on her son's attackers, or do you also detect, for example in the closing, a desire for reconciliation?

Despite the fierceness of Schindler's moral attack on her son's assailants, the very fact of her ironizing rather than resorting to name-calling implies that she considers her opponents capable of reflection. Her closing paragraph then attempts to view these persons in the future as participating in the writer's own value system (loving their children), even while giving them a final dose of shame. The letter does combine some attempt at reconciliation with its basic purpose of denunciation.