



ENGLISH 203
FINAL EXAMINATION
SUMMER 2002-2003
SUMMARY ANALYSIS

Time: 2 ½ hours

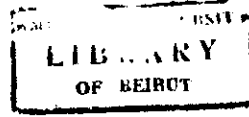
DIRECTIONS: Read the following passage on "Teenagers in Crisis" and write a well-organized and well-developed summary analysis essay of 4-6 paragraphs.

Teenagers in Crisis
by
David Elkind

1. There is no place for teenagers in American society today—not in our homes, not in our schools, and not in society at large. This was not always the case: barely a decade ago, teenagers had a clearly defined position in the social structure. They were the "next generation," the "future leaders" of America. Their intellectual, social, and moral development was considered important, and therefore it was protected and nurtured. The teenager's occasional foibles and excesses were excused as an expression of youthful spirit, a necessary Mardi Gras¹ before assuming adult responsibility and decorum. Teenagers thus received the time needed to adapt to the remarkable transformations their bodies, minds, and emotions were undergoing. Society recognized that the transition from childhood to adulthood was difficult and that young people needed time, support, and guidance in this endeavor.
2. In today's rapidly changing society, teenagers have lost their once privileged position. Instead, they have had a premature adulthood thrust upon them. Teenagers now are expected to confront life and its challenges with the maturity once expected only of the middle-aged, without any time for preparation. Many adults are too busy retooling and retraining their own job skills to devote any time to preparing the next generation of workers. And some parents are so involved in reordering their own lives, managing a career, marriage, parenting, and leisure, that they have no time to give their teenagers; other parents simply cannot train a teenager for an adulthood they themselves have yet to attain fully. The media and merchandisers, too, no longer abide by the unwritten rule that teenagers are a privileged group who require special protection and nurturing. They now see teenagers as fair game for all the arts of persuasion and sexual innuendo once directed only to adult audiences and consumers. High schools, which were once the setting for a unique teenage culture and language, have become miniatures of the adult community. Theft, violence, sex, and substance abuse are now as common in the high schools as they are on the streets.
3. It is true, of course, that many parents and other adults are still committed to giving teenagers the time, protection, and guidance they require to traverse this difficult period. But these well-meaning adults meet almost insurmountable barriers in today's society, and many feel powerless to

provide the kind of guidance they believe teenagers need. For example, a mother of a teenager asked me recently what to do with her fourteen-year-old son who was staying up late to watch X-rated movies on cable television. I suggested that if she did not want him to see the movies, she should not permit him to do so and should give him her reasons for the prohibition. Her next question surprised me. She asked me what she should do if he watches them after she goes to bed. It was clear that the mother felt helpless to monitor her son's TV watching. For this youth, as for many others, premature adulthood is gained by default.

4. In today's society we seem unable to accept the fact of adolescence, that there are young people in transition from childhood to adulthood who need adult guidance and direction. Rather, we assume the teenager is a kind of adult. Whether we confer premature adulthood upon teenagers because we are too caught up in our own lives to give them the time and attention they require or because we feel helpless to provide them with the safe world they need, the end result is the same: teenagers have no place in this society. They are not adults capable of carrying the adult responsibilities we confer upon them. And they are not children whose subservience to adults can be taken for granted. We expect them to be grown up in all those domains where we cannot or do not want to maintain control. But in other domains, such as attending school, we expect our teenagers to behave like obedient children.
5. Perhaps the best word to describe the predicament of today's teenagers is "unplaced." Teenagers are not displaced in the sense of having been put in a position they did not choose to be in (a state sometimes called anomie). Nor are they misplaced in the sense of having been put in the wrong place (a state sometimes called alienation). Rather, they are unplaced in the sense that there is no place for a young person who needs a measured and controlled introduction to adulthood. In a rapidly changing society, when adults are struggling to adapt to a new social order, few adults are genuinely committed to helping teenagers attain a healthy adulthood. Young people are thus denied the special recognition and protection that society previously accorded their age group. The special stage belonging to teenagers has been excised from the life cycle, and teenagers have been given a pro forma² adulthood, an adulthood with all of the responsibilities but few of the prerogatives³. Young people today are quite literally all grown up with no place to go.
6. The imposition of premature adulthood upon today's teenagers affects them in two different but closely related ways. First, because teenagers need a protected period of time within which to construct a personal identity, the absence of that period impairs the formation of that all-important self-definition. Having a personal identity amounts to having an abiding sense of self that brings together, and gives meaning to, the teenager's past while at the same time giving him or her guidance and direction for the future. A secure sense of self, of personal identity, allows the young person to deal with both inner and outer demands with consistency and efficiency. This sense of self is thus one of the teenager's most important defenses against stress. By



impairing his or her ability to construct a secure personal identity, today's society leaves the teenager more vulnerable and less competent to meet the challenges that are inevitable in life.

7. The second effect of premature adulthood is inordinate stress: teenagers today are subject to more stress than were teenagers in previous generations. This stress is of three types. First, teenagers are confronted with many more freedoms today than were available to past generations. Second, they are experiencing losses, to their basic sense of security and expectations for the future, that earlier generations did not encounter. And third, they must cope with the frustration of trying to prepare for their life's work in school settings that hinder rather than facilitate this goal. Any one of these new stresses would put a heavy burden on a young person; taken together, they make a formidable demand on the teenager's ability to adapt to new demands and new situations.
8. Contemporary American society has thus struck teenagers a double blow. It has rendered them more vulnerable to stress while at the same time exposing them to new and more powerful stresses than were ever faced by previous generations of adolescents. It is not surprising, then, to find that the number of stress-related problems among teenagers has more than trebled in the last decade and a half.
9. In times of rapid social change, even committed parents are confused about what limits to set and what values to advocate and to enforce. For us adults this is a time to give serious thought to our values and principles, just as it is a time to struggle for greater tolerance. Ironically, our responses may only make matters worse for teenagers. Caught between two value systems, parents become ambivalent, and teenagers perceive their ambivalence as license. Failing to act, we force our teenagers to do so, before they are ready. Because we are reluctant to take a firm stand, we deny teenagers the benefit of our parental concern and we impel them into premature adulthood. We say, honestly, "I don't know," but teenagers hear, "They don't care."

Adapted from
Multitude: Cross-Cultural Readings For Writers

1. Mardi Gras: Shrove Tuesday celebrated in Catholic countries with masquerades and dancing.
2. Pro forma: in advance
3. Prerogative: exclusive right or privilege