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Text’s author and title/comment?

*My Grandmother’s Ashtray: Why Smart People Make Stupid Decisions* by Laurence Gonzales

Consider the text’s rhetorical situation. What is behind its creation? What is its audience?

This article was a reflection upon prior experiences, created to explain why intelligent people make foolish decisions. The audience the author ties to reach is anyone interested in learning about the intricate workings of the brain.

What is the author’s purpose? Inform, persuade, or entertain? Explain.

Gonzales’s main purpose is to inform. The author shares her own experiences to explain her point. During a hiking trip in the Santa Monica Mountains, she comes across what the author thinks is her grandmother’s ashtray and reaches for it. In reality, Gonzales was reaching for a serpent. Through this example, Gonzales explains how she was subject to making stupid decisions as well, and describes why the mind works in this way. The author explains the psychology behind deception, causing us to make simple-minded decisions. She states that a strong sense of familiarity paired with a sudden surge of curiosity drove her to reach out for the snake.

Cite a passage that illustrates the author’s message (embodied thought/logos) and discuss it.

After her hike, Gonzales recollects, “I had both a strong mental model and a familiar behavioral script working against me and blinding me to the obvious... The nostalgic emotional attachment I had for it made it a strong and persistent model, difficult to displace” (145). Gonzales informs the readers of the physical and mental forces at play in this scenario. Her spur of the moment decision to grab the ashtray sprouted, as memories of the author’s grandmother that flooded her all at once. In a heist, she ignorantly reached out for the tray, but found a snake instead. The author explains the inner workings of the brain, which in this case, tricked her into making a stupid decision.

Cite additional content that develops / supports / illustrates the writer’s message. What claims does the author make? How does the author assert his/her presence and knowledge? (Build from previous section).

The author reveals, “my lack of experience with real rattlesnakes made for a much weaker competing model” (145). Gonzales explains that because she lacks knowledge towards snakes, she was unaware that the ashtray she saw while hiking was truly a serpent. The author supports her claim that smart people make stupid decisions. Gonzales asserts her presence by establishing that it was her lack of experience and knowledge that contributed to her mistake.

Describe the tone of the text.

This insightful article took up an informative as well as a casual tone. The author describes her own experiences in the first person point of view, making the text casual. Gonzales also educates the readers on the physocology of the brain, adding informative as another one of the author’s attitudes.

What words/phrases reveal the text’s tone?

The author opens by saying, “when I was a child in San Antonio, Texas, My grandmother had an ashtray that I loved” (144). These words reveal the author’s casual attitude, making the text relatable to the readers and allowing for easier comprehension.

Being an erudite author, Gonzales uses her experiences to educate others of the reasons behind the makings of stupid decisions. She uses the words, “this is an example of”, which reveal her informative tone.

Point out prominent passages, lines, words, phrases and discuss how such language features contribute to the substance of the text and its appeals. (Says / Does).

After reaching out for the serpent, the author concludes, “I was operating as if under a spell, in a vacation state of mind” (145). Here, Gonzales uses comparisons to depict the effects of her actions. This contributes to the text’s appeals, as it aids in the understanding of the author’s feelings. The use of this phrase also adds to the substance of the text, as it gives evidence of the authors point. It states that after that initial flicker of remembrance her grandmother's ashtray, Gonzales was unable to resist the temptation of taking it, causing her to make a stupid decision.

How are ideas arranged? How do ideas take shape through the text’s content and its function?

The author begins the the article by giving the readers insight on her childhood. Gonzales does this to explain the context of the ashtray and how it belonged to her grandmother. She then transitions to a change in setting, the Santa Monica Mountains, where she believed to have spotted her grandmother’s ashtray. Gonzales does this to use her experiences to explain how the brain deceives us into making idiotic decisions. The author illustrates how our experiences experiences along with what we learn can affect the way we act and perceive that world.

What else did you find remarkable or engaging about this piece of writing? Explain.

I found that the casual and retrospective writing style used by the author was engaging. I also appreciated that the piece was very informative and organized. Gonzales’s article was also explained very well, making the text comprehensive.