

Brandon Evans

Dr. González

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“Hostage (Excerpt)” and Showing the Harshness of Imprisonment

“Hostage (Excerpt)” by Guy Delisle, is a brilliant piece of comics literature that uses the contrast of readers' privileged realities, to create a greater understanding and empathic response with André, as he lives his life in the depths of despair during imprisonment.. These facts will materialize in this examination as we break down visual rhetoric with color and emotion, review the heist nature of the narrative, and look at the significance of the easily obtainable garlic clove. These combined increase the audience’s empathetic response to the overall piece.

Breaking down Delisle’s color and visual choices of Hostage creates an emotional overlay for the entire piece, and sets the tone of our expectations. Delisle is clearly conveying that the situation André is in is bleak and has been for some time. The first six and final three panels are remarkably darker than the other panels where white is used for walls, backgrounds, and anything that isn’t black or blue. This darkness which overlays these panels refers to the despair, boredom, and hopelessness felt by the prisoner, the main character of this story. Every panel is colored with a muted blue, also adding to the feelings of long term sadness and depression. We can gauge a sense of time by examining the length of André’s beard, clearly unkempt, as well as every time the bottom of his feet are visible, we see they’re black with soot. One subtle detail is when André’s captor enters the room, dubbed “the tall guy,” André’s pupils are lost behind his glasses. His posture during this sequence conveys his downtrodden situation,

revealing André's absence of humanity and lack of freedom as a prisoner, through the color, and a few details therein, alone. By understanding the visual rhetoric of the excerpt, it makes that much more of an emotional impact, as one reads through André's experience. Because of the power of the subtleties of visual rhetoric we subconsciously set our expectations as to what kind of story this is and where it's headed, yet most importantly it prepares us for the empathetic experience that Delisle wants for us as we read about André's and his captivity.

At the base of the narrative, we have the story of a heist. However, the narrative element that makes this particular heist interesting is the nature of the object to be stolen. It's not riches of any form, but a simple morsel of food. Heists commonly feature a criminal, yet we also know that André is not such, as we can read from the Amazon listing description that he was captured and is a POW. This fact can be further cemented in the mind of the reader, as previously discussed Delisle has used visual rhetoric to set the precedent that this narrative is more-so charged with negative emotions. This excerpt however, still qualifies as a caper narrative, though without a criminal or riches, yet a caper narrative nonetheless, and this is one of the reasons for the reader to find this particular excerpt so captivating... A man, desperate for anything to help him cling to life, attempts to steal about an eleventh (Logsdon, Jason) of a vegetable. For any regular human, reading about the lengths André goes through to get one clove of garlic, as he orchestrates and carries out this heist through several panels, it should help any reader shed some light on just how incarcerated André is, and how dire his situation is. The heist narrative brings a sense of excitement, hooking the reader, but at the same time is a great device in showing a dark sense of pitiful struggle, again, helping us see the contrast of our own lives against André's and thus forming a stronger bond of empathy for him and the story.

Contrast between André's situation and the average citizen continues to grow as we further examine the few panels where André has a clove in his possession. He first remarks on the smell, verbalizing an "Mmm..." of delight and remarking in his mind, "What an incredible smell!" Garlic, which makes for a powerful flavor enhancer in any food, is consumed by 18% of Americans on any given day according to a study done in 2000 (Lucier). It's become commonplace enough to be a daily consumable, easily overlooked by any given individual. For André to be so overjoyed by such a simple item is shocking for the reader. To further this emotional response, André doesn't consume the clove immediately. Instead he waits for hours, just thinking about the mere thought of consuming it, teasing his mind with only imaginations of the clove and "detail[s] of how he['s] going to savour this little wonder." André continues, "There's a tingle on my tongue, which gives way to a flavor I'd totally forgotten. It spreads through me. 'Mmmmm... Wow!' I continue, one little bite at a time. Good God! It's so great, I feel dizzy!" (Glockner, pg. 61) By the time André does consume the clove with bread, his experience is euphoric, and even sensual. This is the pinnacle of the piece. The contrast it gives to society is astounding. In showing this display of emotion to the reader, with whom garlic might mean nothing more than a spice, it instantly shows the audience just how deeply despaired André is. By existing, and feeling the contrast of our own privileges and experiences beside André's we know he's been in some emotionally terrible places. Places where even the mundane can excite and cause euphoria.

The excerpt ends with three large panels, dark, as were the first 6 which were discussed earlier in this examination, again the darkness representing how the depression is back. The desperation is back. The garlic clove is gone, and with it, the thing that distracted him from

ruminating on his true hopelessness. We see the ceiling, a different ceiling compared to the one we can hardly see on page 57 with “the tall guy,” representing not just how André has been moved physically to a new location, but also psychologically to a darker corner of his mind. Fully transitioned back into the reality of his predicament, he thinks of ways to escape, but cannot find a solution that could work. A stark divergence to the last page where he imagined scenarios of eating a clove of garlic, which he carried out successfully. The energy and contradictory nature the last panels have to the previous few are palpable. The reader, feeling this energy, takes one last dive into the depths of André’s situation and is left questioning the value of their own life experiences and privileges, as they wallow with André, feeling as though life is missing some gravitas that made it interesting.

In conclusion, as the reader examines the visual rhetoric with color and emotion, reviews the heist nature of the narrative, and looks at the significance of the easily obtainable garlic clove, the reader is able to more fully understand and empathize with André as he lives his life in the depths of despair during imprisonment. The understanding of the depth of André’s emotional well being is done in so tactful a way as to not make us feel depressed as we attempt to empathize, as we share his journey and small distracting victory, and through these, we understand André at his deepest.

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