

Judges' Commentary on "Shades of Grey"

by

Alexis Cameron

**"Shades of Grey" received an Honorable Mention
in the 2011-12 Composition Program Writing Contest**

Alexis Cameron's "Shades of Grey" is a lyric essay that arose from her desire to investigate the possibility that there might be "some mathematical principle that explained how events people experience shape them." Her framing binary is light vs. dark; her chosen subject is a friend, a young man, who, she says, should "be the most hardened and calloused person I know," but is instead "the most honorable, loving, caring man I know." She works more to explore than simply tell his story, trying to unravel its mystery, relying on his eyes and voice for the narrative line, which she chronically disrupts with themes from science, astrology, mathematics and psychology. What she discovers through the writing is far different from what she expected.

Cameron writes his story in the first person, to simulate an autobiographical perspective, creating an emotionally powerful narrative that impels the reader to share the author's struggle to understand who exactly this young man is. The simple, almost stark sentences, of the opening narrative sequence, full of action, create a tension that the reader can feel, as the "I" in the story encounters violent act after violent act. The interspersed descriptions of violent cosmic phenomena, poised along the narrative line, create the sensation that the violence of human life might simply echo comparable events in nature. In the next segment

of the story we see the young man developing, trying to figure out how he can become who he wants to be: someone who can make his father proud. Here, Cameron borrows the idea of “individuation” from psychology, breaking his experience into three parts to represent the three parts of the human psyche (5). The collective unconscious and personal unconscious are shaped by his life with his family and dealing drugs, but his “ego,” his conscious self, begins to develop when he comes to a foster home and becomes “a member of a new family” and a football “star” (9). He dares to think his life can be different. Cameron mirrors this process in a complex sequence of star images: from “the over 100 million in the Milky Way” (8) to “five point star” (15) that represents “power and money” in gang life.

The story progresses episodically—the apparently bright surface (football stardom, a scholarship, college) darkened by the menacing undertow of ongoing connections with the gang culture—toward a dramatic resolution that brings psychological integration for narrator and, seemingly, author alike, allowing both “to acknowledge his or her past and use his or her new insight to positively impact their future” (20). Cameron’s essay is a collaboration of sorts with her narrator, whose “ability to tell me his story made the piece work.” However, her re-telling of the story, her literal cutting up of its pieces and fitting them together, her interweaving of his story with science and psychology and philosophy, demonstrates the impact that writing as a mode of investigation can have. “Life may be black and white,” she explains. “But people aren’t so simple. Dark and light mix to form some shade of grey, some color or quality that I can’t quantify or reconcile.”