

Judges' Commentary on "Superhuman Chemo-Pee"

by

Chelsea Jones

**"Superhuman Chemo-Pee" won first prize in the University of Pittsburgh's
2006/07 Composition Program Writing Contest**

In "Superhuman Chemo-Pee," Chelsea Jones reflects on her experience with Hodgkins Lymphoma, a cancer of the lymphatic system. This essay was written in response to a Freshman Seminar assignment that asked students to consider how various cinematic approaches might work to help them "achieve your goal for your reading audience." Jones' approach to this complex assignment is to ally form and content; the narrative about her disease, its effects, and the effects of her treatment is interwoven with quotations of her closest friends, who witnessed her illness and contributed to her survival with their love, attention, and self-described "potty-mouth humor." The essay is structured as a narrative that is occasionally interrupted with the voices of Jones' friends, who, as if responding to interview questions asked by the author, describe her actions, words, and symptoms during her illness. In addition, they reflect on their own fears and actions as they watch their friend struggle with the disease.

The essay celebrates the seemingly mundane words of Jones' friends, using quotes from everyday life as sources of information and analysis. The humor shared by her circle of friends is dirty, foul-mouthed, and full of attitude. It is a celebration of defiance against grim doctors and frightened parents, and ultimately against despair. Their quotes create a context through which we might better understand Jones' satiric resistance to this frightening, debilitating disease and allow new insight into past trials, much as critical texts give us new insight into the works they analyze. The quotes reveal information about the position of the author in the midst of this emotionally taxing experience that she could not reveal about herself, thus allowing the piece to function simultaneously as a representation of experience and commentary on it, which is exactly what good composition essays should do. Jones' ability to take on the challenge of the

assignment in such a unique manner was one of the deciding factors in awarding it first place.

We were also impressed with the author's voice, particularly its restraint. Never once does our narrator indulge in self-pity, or melodrama; her satirical wit is presented unwaveringly through clever scene construction and in exposition. It is the exemplary work of an author who is in control of her writing voice, and in control of her subject matter. A difficult task, as her subject is a disease that once controlled her fate.

In the final scene of Jones' essay, the reader observes as she watches the final moments of a surgery being performed on her in the late stages of her recovery. Throughout the essay, we are watching through Jones' eyes as her life with Hodgkins is dissected. It is an intimate, gory moment, which is made beautiful and humorous by the author; her unflinching, understated description of this moment demonstrates her ability to reflect accurately and bluntly as if the experience were distant from herself. The brutality and unfairness of this moment—why any young woman's body should have to fight off death—is perfectly apparent, even as we laugh at our narrator's jokes. And we are reminded of the power of humor when shared.

Throughout the essay, Jones conveys the necessity of this humor. She also effectively adopts a prose style that reflects the vocabulary of her friends: their informality and off-the-cuff nonchalance. The author seems aware of the simple, profane nature of her prose, and justifies it by showing her readers the purpose and context of her language through her well-crafted scenes and descriptions. Despite the rebellious approach of her essay, the traditional aim of a composition essay to ally quotation and exposition in an attempt to make sense of a passage—whether in a text or in life—is at work.

At the heart of this essay, we saw a celebration of words, of language, of the “ordinary” or “profane,” and its ability to describe and analyze life and what allows us to survive its darker moments.

To read the full text of Chelsea Jones' essay, [click here](#)