

# An insight on ashley anderson: the development from complete airhead to an airhea...

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In the novel *We Are All Made of Molecules* written by Susin Nielsen, the readers follow the journey of the main characters, Ashley and Stewart, through their perspectives on life and the bridge between “tween” and young adult. Ashley starts the novel off as an academically inept pretentious fourteen year old kid, but by the end of the story is seen as being a more socially accepting, more understanding young adult. According to Joy Court, a book reviewer for the *School Librarian*, “Ashley is an airhead desperate to maintain her position at the top of the social tree” (Court 120). At the age of fourteen, a character like Ashley wouldn’t be interested in anything more than keeping up appearances and making sure nothing stands in her way of maintaining her queen bee status. Ashley isn’t necessarily a character that most readers gravitate towards but one can’t help but give kudos to a girl that transitions from airhead tween to semi mature young adult in the matter of 200 plus pages. Ashley’s childlike characteristics such as naivety, being self absorbed, and being unaccepting/judgmental of others leads to a series of unfortunate events and ultimately to her social downfall, while in contrast, her new found acceptance and changing of such characteristics in terms of the theme of maturation due to these unforeseen events is what results in her altered outlook on life towards the end of the novel.

Ashley is notably the most childlike character throughout the novel given her grammatical errors, caring only about what people think about her, and judging people solely on appearance. As soon as the novel begins, Ashley is depicted as a very superficial unappealing character that is rather immature and childlike in her actions at times. An unnamed author for *Kirkus Reviews* states that Nielsen’s writing style “[allows] readers to take self-absorbed

Ashley with a grain of salt as she goes through what her mother terms the ‘demon seed’ stage” (“Nielsen, Susin: We Are All Made of Molecules”). This “demon seed” stage of Ashley’s life is proof of her immature personality traits that she has as a pubescent fourteen year old tween. The demon seed stage reaches into many different aspects of Ashley’s life but specifically towards the people she deems as being her friends. An example of Ashley’s immature “demon seed” nature is when Lauren, Ashley’s best friend, divulges to the ninth grade that Ashley’s new little brother is a “freakazoid”. Ashley then retaliates against her best friend and states that “Lauren had left me no choice but to spread the rumor about her bra-stuffing, but then somehow she tried to make it so it was my fault, and she wouldn’t even talk to me when the bell rang. Plus she got Lindsay, Amira, and Yoko to not talk to me either” (Neilson 49). This sabotaging of her supposed best friend is a clear example of how Ashley is not emotionally mature enough to sustain healthy friendships, especially if she has the mentality of “you hurt me so I am going to hurt you back”, often as children do. These forms of unhealthy relationships can be seen throughout the novel with the people she believes to be her friends.

In terms of character dynamics, Ashley and Lauren are constantly making snide comments to one another, Ashley consciously ices out her friends and vice versa, and she keeps her relationship with Jared continuing far longer than it should have. The way that Ashley narrates this section as well is an insight into how she is not only emotionally immature but academically immature as well. For the entire explanation of the story, there are only two

sentences, resulting in massive run on sentences. Another example of Ashley's immaturity can be seen in the conversation between herself and her mother when she is describing her boyfriend Jared by stating "[He is] only the hottest guy at our school [...] Oh, he is. He's also rich!" (Neilson 145). In this conversation with her mother, Ashley gives insight on how at this stage in her life, she cares purely about appearances and not much else. As seen through prior encounters with Jared in the novel, the readers know that Jared isn't necessarily what you would call a "good guy", but through Ashley's eyes, he is the perfect man due to the fact that he comes from a wealthy family and is handsome. Ashley continues to have toxic relationships in her life due to her immature outlook on life that stresses the importance of menial things such as appearances, social status, and the depiction of her image.

Ashley incurs a negative response in being childlike due to the fact that she then has to endure the consequences of lacking crucial mature personality traits. Teri Lesensne, in a book review for the Booklist, states that "Ashley, meanwhile, tends to see only how the actions of others are an inconvenience for her" (Lesesne 71). This form of tunnel vision and lacking of mature personality traits leads to the negative outcome of Jared sexually assaulting Ashley on two different occasions. The mature more rational response to the first encounter where Jared did not take "no" for an answer would have been to end the relationship right then and there, but due to her immature mentality and fear of what people will say about her, she disregards the red flags. Ashley states "Half of me thinks I should walk away now [...] Also, I'm

pretty sure he was just about to hear what I was saying to him and stop” (Neilson 172). This ties into her form of tunnel vision because due to Jared’s actions, she is in a sense forced to disregard his actions, if not be scrutinized for responding to the situation otherwise. In Ashley’s emotionally underdeveloped mind, there is no room for negative feedback of her facade, so she must down play the entire encounter and leave it to the thought that she is overreacting. In order to protect her image, she must lie to all of her friends and pretend that what she encounters with Jared is okay and that it never happened, and continues on in her toxic relationship with her homophobic sexual assaulter of a boyfriend. Ashley endures negative experiences due to her underdeveloped emotional maturity, which subsequently leads to her emotional and social downfall.

The notable theme that arises for Ashley is found in the form of emotional growth and maturity along with the development of wisdom. Throughout the entire novel, Ashley can be seen struggling with issues such as misinterpreting sexuality, caring about what other people think/the image of herself, and caring solely about the look of things/people. In contrast, by the end of the novel, it is almost as if there is almost, but not quite, an entirely new Ashley in place of the young girl that the readers met at the beginning of the novel. It isn’t until the end of the novel that Ashley’s newly developed mature personality traits start to shine through. According to Lisa Doucet, a book reviewer for the Canadian Children’s Book News, she states that “ when the chips are down, both Ashley and Stewart discover who their friends really are and what it truly means to be a family” (Doucet 34). Ashley must go

through traumatic experiences such as being sexually assaulted, her father's home being vandalized with vulgar homophobic slurs, and the loss of all of her "friends" in order to develop into the more mature character she is towards the end of the book. By the end of the novel, Ashley has finally accepted Stewart as a part of her family due to her chips being down as Doucet states. Ashley comments that "[I] knew [Stewart had] been defending my honor, and it made me almost proud to have him in our family" (Neilsen 227). By then end of the novel, Ashley has grown her relationship with Stewart and now coexists with her new found semi-step brother. These two young adults may be polar opposites but Stewart has proven to Ashley that he not only loves her but that family is what is most important. It is family that has loved Ashley this entire time, that saved her from possibly horrific events, and ultimately changed her out look on life.

Another example of Ashley's maturation is her now friendship with the people she once called the "tragics". At the beginning of the novel she would have never associated with the people she had once stated weren't even on the social latter. Ashley uses her new found emotional maturity and development of wisdom in order to lend a helping hand to Stewart and others in need. Ashley states "It was Larry who gave me the idea, I started thinking, why not? Why can't we have protection squads?" (Neilson 238). The people she is lending a hand to are people she would have never even given a second glance to, and if she did, it was to solely criticize them. For example Sam, Ashley had stated earlier in the book that she didn't know whether Sam was a girl or a boy, and had commented that Larry was

overweight. The readers see a glimpse of old Ashley still when she mentions that she should give Larry her copy of *The South Beach Diet* but she refrains from saying such a comment and continues on with her conversation with the tragics. Neilsen provides a subtle ode to the old superficial Ashley that still lives within her because after all, she is only a teenager that is learning from her mistakes day by day and is not perfect. Ashley feels a genuine connection to these young adults and doesn't solely base her opinion of them on their appearances, but on how they treat her and Stewart. Another example of Ashley's maturation is her finally accepting that her father is gay and is no longer ashamed of this fact. When going back to school after the horrific New Year's Eve party, Lauren asks Ashley "Is it true your dad's—well — you know?" and Ashley responds with "Gay? Yes, he is" (Nielsen 222). Ashley prior to the events leading up to this pivotal point would have never openly expressed the fact that her father is gay, but after all of the life lessons and trauma she has experienced in such a short time span, something as menial as her father being gay is no longer important to her. She has accepted her father for who he is and loves him regardless of his sexual orientation. This correlates to her weakened sense of what people think of her and her importance of people's appearances in the sense that she no longer stresses the importance of image but rather things that are important, such as what is on the inside is what counts.

Ashley is seen as not an entirely new person, but rather a new and improved version of herself. Neilson's development of Ashley's character as a whole embodies the teenage journey of coming into the person one will be and

developing ones maturity level from naive teen to a more wise adult.

Ashley's new found acceptance of others, her blended family, and of herself is one of the main points of this novel and provides an insight on how young teens develop into their own. Ashley's new found acceptance and emotional growth leads to her altered outlook on life and climaxes up to her subsequent acceptance that " WE ARE ALL MADE OF MOLECULES" (Neilson 245).

## Works Cited

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