

## An Analysis of Past Secrets and Modern Complications in "Just Another Hero" by Sharon Draper

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### Abstract

The intricate lives of young adults, at times, are outcomes of a maze of tangled agonies and anguishes embedded in their consciousness. Author Sharon Draper, with great dexterity, has connected the past of the characters that influence their behaviors in the present, which are results of psychological effects. With characters of diverse backgrounds in a senior school, the plot sheds light on the circumstances they have faced and the challenges that they encounter in leading normal lives in the present. The efforts of the characters to break the shackles of the past experiences while living in the present, tests their stoicism to the limits, and offers a chance to understand their situations as a reward.

**Keywords:** young adults, behavior, circumstances, school, relations, psychology

تحليل الأسرار الماضية والتعقيدات الحديثة في رواية "مجرد بطل آخر" لشيرون دراير

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### المخلص:

غالبًا ما تكون الحياة المعقدة للشباب نتيجة لمتاهة من الآلام والمعاناة المتجذرة في وعيهم. تسلط الكاتبة شيرون دراير، ببراعة كبيرة، الضوء على ماضي الشخصيات وتأثيره على سلوكهم في الحاضر، بوصفه نتيجة لتأثيرات نفسية متراكمة. ومن خلال شخصيات تنتمي إلى خلفيات متنوعة في مدرسة ثانوية، تكشف الحكمة عن الظروف التي مرّوا بها والتحديات التي يواجهونها في سبيل عيش حياة طبيعية في الوقت الحاضر. إن سعي الشخصيات لتحطيم قيود التجارب الماضية أثناء محاولتهم العيش في الحاضر يضع قدرتهم على التحمل النفسي على المحك، ويمنح القارئ فرصة لفهم أوضاعهم بشكل أعمق

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الشباب، السلوك، الظروف، المدرسة، العلاقات، علم النفس

The role of fiction in the world of literature is to entertain and at the same time, bring to light the problems that ail people and the society at large. Young adult fiction has grown in popularity by leaps and bounds in the last couple of decades, and has played a significant role in showcasing the circumstances in which the behaviors of teenagers can be attributed to their stressful personal lives. Sharon Draper, in Just Another Hero, creates young adult characters that are struggling to their very core with life and themselves which reflects in their conduct and with the individuals around them. The seeds for their abnormal behavior are sown in

their past and at the same time, the unresolved psychological issues that they have caused, makes their present miserable and complicated in more ways than one. The author has chosen Frederick Douglass High School to unfold the story with students who have a past that is troubled in common. The protagonist and senior year student Arielle Grisham is facing mounting troubles at home and with her classmates, who despite trying hard, fail to fathom her abominable conduct. Due to her aberrant behavior, which results even after the individuals around her have been kind to her, she is despised and viewed with suspicion.

Besides Arielle, Sharon Draper has drafted in Kofi Freeman, Jack “Crazy” Krasinski, Osrick “Weird” Wardley, and Eddie, characters who not only play significant roles in consolidating the themes of the novel, but are also in the same boat as Arielle regarding their mental and emotional struggles. The presence of adverse situations in the lives of teenagers while there should be none, should be squarely blamed on their parents and that is what the past secrets are about in the novel. It is an abhorrent thought that the carefree teenage period should be riddled with psychological problems due to the irresponsible acts of parents or one of the parents. The teenagers in the novel find themselves in extremely precarious situations and as they are young and incapable of surmounting situations that are not of their making, the collapse of their stoicism takes twisted forms. Moreover, as their troubles are related to their personal lives at home, they are kept under wraps for the fear of being alienated, criticized and judged. The impact of the past on the minds of the troubled teens on their present is severely damaging to their existence and almost extinguishes out their future prospects. To portray that situation, the author has elaborately, and painstakingly, depicted events and happenings that can be witnessed in real life. By that, though the situations of the afflicted teenagers can be termed commonplace, the focus and message of Sharon Draper is on its addressal.

Therefore, she creates circumstances in the family lives of the troubled teenagers wherein the past and the present take effect on the minds of Arielle, Kofi, Jack and Eddie. Family dysfunction causes instability that “is associated with social maladjustment, including behaviors such as aggression toward peers, teachers, or parents.” (Briggs et al., 2024). The aforementioned observation holds true when the lives of the troubled teenagers are examined. Kofi’s addiction to the painkiller OxyContin is the culmination of his troubles due to his traumatic experience of his hazing ceremony and his dysfunctional family, and has less to do with his fractured wrist because he gets addicted to it. Any addiction is a recourse to relief from miseries that cannot be escaped. As a young individual, who was unable to find his way out, his mental state almost put paid to his bright academic future. Here, the author draws attention to the situations where bright young students are at a risk of

losing their way because of troubles that ail them. Kofi Freeman was under intense stress due to the penury of his family which was a result of his father's gambling and mother's addiction to alcohol. However, despite adverse circumstances, Kofi getting awarded a scholarship to MIT which otherwise was beyond the means of his family, reiterates the point that whatever the past might have been, belief in oneself helps a person realize their dreams.

Nevertheless, battling inner demons and real life situations for teens is a daunting task. Arielle, on the face of it, lived a life of luxury with her mother and third step-father Chadwick Kensington O Neil but all was not what it seemed. Chad's iron-fisted control over the mother daughter duo's financial spending which he considered extravagant did not end there. He punished them for it. Moreover, Arielle losing her biological father in a car accident had permanently left a scar on her soul. Things went from bad to worse when Chad abandoned them without any prior warning. Arielle getting panicked and fearful when she realizes that Chad had left them, an incident which reflected her subconscious dependency on Chad. The feelings of helplessness and gloom about the future of her mom and her gripped her. It can be surmised that "these are children who are more insecure. They have low self-esteem and difficulties in managing their emotions and affectivity. Throughout their lives, sadness, depression, lack of interest, poor academic performance, lack of motivation or passivity tend to appear" and "there can be insecurity, which can be masked and shown with overconfidence, arrogance, aggressiveness or rebelliousness as a way of covering up painful feelings." (Mendia, 2023, "as cited in" Pinedo, 2023).

Additionally, the incident raises a pertinent question. Could it be that Arielle was unable to cope with her father going out of her life again? Did the wounds of the past open up? Was her past getting connected with her present when she made that frantic call to her mother informing about Chad's desertion of them? It definitely seems so, and there are reasons to believe it. Digging deeper into Arielle's subconscious will provide answers to her behaviors, including the kindness she displayed for Osrick through her courage. That would also connect the impact and influence of her past on her present. The contrast in Arielle's behavior are based on her mental and emotional triggers. To comprehend Arielle's out of character behavior in protecting Osrick, it is pertinent to understand the meaning of a trigger in psychological terms. Therefore, "A trigger is a person, place, thing, or situation that elicits an intense or unexpected emotional response or causes an individual to relive a past trauma. Any sensory stimulus can be a potential trigger. Triggers are unique from threats. Essentially, a non-threatening stimulus is triggering an autonomic (fight-or-flight) response." (Cooks-Campbell, 2023).

The bullying of Osrick made Arielle imagine herself in his shoes. Subconsciously, she knew that when she needed someone to be there for her, there was nobody. That thought created a sense of support in her for others who were in a similar helpless position. Humans have an innate sense of justice, and that in turn, is a part of their fabric of thought as they have been wronged or been victims of injustice at some point of time in their lives. Arielle too felt a burst of compassion, and at the same time, the anger in her for what she went through without no fault of hers, took hold of her and resulted in her rescue of Osrick Wardley. The events of her past shaped and influenced her behavior, either her form of a protecting angel for a bullied boy or her act of alienating anyone who helped her. Her withdrawal into her shell was a result of what she was battling with – her past and the situation at home. With that in mind, it can be said that teenage psychology is a complex subject because there are multiple factors at work, unlike those of adults whose minds have got set in certain ways. The minds of young adults are learning through their senses that are processed through very little experiences of life and that creates permutations and combination of possibilities that usually have no foundations in the reality of life.

Moreover, the treatment meted out to her mother and her by Chad make matters worse for her because as a teenager she is not able to clearly comprehend Chad's behavior. Teenagers are at a learning phase of their lives and they do understand what's happening around them but they are not fully mentally and emotionally mature to fathom the why of the happenings that bring misery upon them. Arielle's mind would obviously try to reason that if Chad got married to her mother because he loved her, then why the ill-treatment? The fear in her heart is about the behavior of Chad, who, instead of loving her mother and her unconditionally, puts them on a tight leash. Similarly, Kofi's situation is traumatic, depressive and miserable due to the reckless and immoral life his parents lead. Furthermore, their dire financial situation puts additional burden on Kofi and his helplessness leads him to get addicted to painkillers. Again, his past plays the most vital role to shape his present, that of addiction. Matters were already worse for him as his father gambles away money and his mother finds solace in alcohol. A gambler as a father and an alcoholic as a mother is enough reason for even the toughest of teen to collapse under the intense pressure. To complicate matters his family is served with an eviction notice, which again, piles up their worries.

In addition, Arielle losing her boyfriend Jericho Prescott to Olivia Thigpen too can be attributed to what she witnessed about her mother's broken marriage her and relationship with Chad. Teenagers observe and learn from their surroundings and more often than not, the flaws in their conduct are a result of the conditioning that they receive at home. That's why the emphasis on a good home environment is

given precedence over a good schooling. Even a passing glance on the past of the teens in the novels is enough to reveal that their present is a result of the past. A past that caused more harm than good and got ingrained in their conduct. An interesting observation that can be made is the teens possess good character but their conduct overshadows all the goodness in them. An individual who is unaware of the functioning of the mind, more often than not, incorrectly considers conduct as character. Jack is a loner, but is labeled as crazy. Osrick is thought to be as the thief but he isn't. Arielle has a good heart but is disliked for her conduct. All the labels that are stuck on those teens are because of a past or a stereotype or preconceived notions that are held. The past can only be erased in the future but it influences the present because it is closer to the present than the future.

The thefts that took place in the school made Osrick miserable and fearful. Suspected as the thief, Osrick clears his name as the burden of proof lies on him and his investigation leads him to Mrs. Pringle who is arrested. By that incident, Sharon Draper reflects on the distorted manner of thinking of society which is based on heresy and the way opinions are formed of individuals based on their conduct in the past. The author through the incidents in the novels, has a plethora of meaningful messages that have to be interpreted in the correct manner by viewing them in different perspectives. Firstly, as most of the readers of the novel are young adults, the author attempts to tell them that just as appearances are deceptive, so is conduct. Secondly, the past of any individual is not a criterion to judge them in the present. Thirdly, it's impossible to know what battles are teenagers fighting within and outside themselves. And lastly, she uses the novel to convey the readers that any individual who is going through mental and emotional issues needs to be treated with patience and compassion. The messages of the novelist in the present will be immensely helpful for the future as the young adults of today are the adults of tomorrow and would be responsible for the manner in which society as a whole forms opinions of individuals.

Another important character that Sharon Draper uses is Jack Krasinski. The silent mental suffering that he is going through, which is nothing short of a terrible torture that is difficult to put into words. The character represents a majority of the teenagers who try to find a way out of their psychological trauma but don't have a clue on how to do it. In such a scenario, the alleviation of the suffering takes forms through behaviors that appear to be acts of insanity. That is so because teens with psychological issues don't know what's wrong with them due to their lack of understanding on the way the mind functions and the effect of conditioning by the environment on them. And the people around them too, with their unawareness about the way consciousness works are unable to fathom the conduct of mentally troubled individuals. The harrowing past of Jack takes form through his

unconventional conduct in the present. His bizarre sense of dressing and his habit of carrying his musical instruments with him and playing them whenever he feels like was his defense mechanism against his internal conflict that plagued him. The author has repeatedly emphasized on the conduct of the characters to convey that the past and the present are connected through it.

Furthermore, the manner in which Jack is ridiculed and ignored further makes this complicated for him and the individuals around him. The suppressed and pent-up negative emotions in him burst into a twisted violent behavior when he takes his fellow students hostage with an assault rifle. At first, such an incident, would be seen and interpreted as an act of crime with a dastardly motive. However, yet again, Sharon Draper conceals the causes behind the effects. The hostage situation perpetrated by Jack is the result of the snapping of his resistance against his mental battles that had been going on for a long time. Matters were made worse when his fellow students ignored and slighted him. Only when it is revealed that his abnormal behavior was due to his mental afflictions, does the reader realize the reason of his conduct. The impact of the past on the present is thoroughly underlined yet again. The essence of the novel *Just Another Hero* is the psychological battle that the young adults in the novel are fighting and Sharon Draper articulates their sufferings in the most lucid manner with depictions that are real and relatable to the readers.

Additionally, the connections and relations between the past and the present are used to denote the changes that happen in an individual through the experiences they go through. The happenings of the past don't make sudden changes in the conduct or character of an individual and that's an important observation that can be made and the author wants the readers to know. It is a slow build-up that is repeatedly experienced and when the courage to resist that negative influence is exhausted, it takes root in the subconscious of the individual which is reflected through the changes in their behavior. Those changes make an individual to think and act differently. That's what is observed through Arielle, Kofi and Jack in a prominent manner. The changes that take place in them are because of a negative environment and also because the individuals around them are of no help to them. That lack of understanding made Arielle, Kofi and Jack into individuals they were not. The author has highlighted events and incidents of the past that impact the present of the characters in a very damaging way. At the same time, it is absolutely necessary to take into consideration the knowing of the lack of support of people in the minds of the characters that hurts them the most but they cannot voice it because they know that it will be of no help. That is so because the people around them are the cause of their problems most of the times.

At the same time, what comes across as an important factor in the novel is its setting. Sharon Draper has deliberately used the school to make the events unfold, and rightly so because a school is place where individuals of different characters gather together for a long period of their lives but their personal lives are mostly hidden. Therefore, only through the behavior of an individual can their personal lives be examined or known. Also, the presence of individuals with varied dispositions make a vital impact as opinions and beliefs get rubbed on each other. The past that is talked about in the novel is the mental abuse that the central characters have been subjected to and their present is about the behavior that they reflect because of it. When the effect factor is taken into consideration, the characters usually display negative traits save Osrick who is determined to get his name cleared of the thievery that takes place in the school. Also, the characters show different levels of resistance to their mental abuse. However, it also depends on the degree of abuse they are subjected to. The novel takes into consideration all those aspects to present a clear and vivid depiction of the connection of the past to the present.

Furthermore, the circumstances that are to be blamed for the damage that they cause to the consciousness of the characters are more often than not, a result of a dysfunctional family and events in which they had no role to play. A family like that of Kofi or the pain and hurt that Arielle carries of the murder of her father who she had hardly seen or remembers or the agony and anguish that Jack goes through are circumstances and events that they has no control over and were not of their making. However, to struggle against the suffering, that too which is psychological, is not an easy task as they are defined as “a wide spectrum of diseases, with various symptoms and signs, but are all characterized by some combination of atypical emotions, thoughts and behavior. Such illnesses include schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, depression, autism, and numerous disorders.” ((Manderscheid et al., 2010, World Health Organization, 2012). Therefore, the young adult characters are fighting an enemy they know nothing about. But, the very fact they endeavor to fight and not give up by committing suicide or becoming drifters is in itself a testimony to their grit and gumption in the face of adversity of the scariest kind.

Ultimately, the thread that connects the past of the characters to the present are the abusive experiences they go through. The effect of that past on the characters takes the form of psychological problems. Arielle, Jack, Kofi and Osrick are all heroes in their own way and hence the word ‘hero’ in the title of the novel. It must be said that the author has, with great dexterity, brought out the essence of the workings of the minds of the young adults based on their past which they try to break free from. Also, the author makes sure to emphasize “in-the-moment relatability and the exploration of common themes that matter to teenagers through the lens of young

protagonists.” (Wayne & Ehlers, 2024). Those exploration of themes have been very effectively pursued by Sharon Baker through the lives of young adults in the novel and provides the readers a better understanding of the conflicts that teenagers go through even when they have no inkling about their ferocity. In doing so the connection between their past and the present are firmly established in ways that take form through behaviors. That is the effect that Sharon Baker talks about in her novel.

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