

Ramona Quimby Grows Up:

Tracing the Character Development of Ramona in the Henry Huggins and Ramona Series

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LIS 514

They found the girls in front of Beezus' house. They were busy tying a long jumping rope from the horse chestnut tree across the sidewalk to the lilac bush. Ramona, who was wearing pink coveralls and curlers in her hair, was scratching on the bark of the chestnut tree with her fingernails.

"Hi," said Henry.

"Hello," answered Beezus, stopping work on the rope.

"Mewow, mewow," said Ramona.

"What does she mean, 'Mewow'?" asked Henry

"Oh don't pay any attention to her," answered Beezus. "That's the way she says miaow. She's pretending she's a cat."

"Mewow," said Ramona and patted the curlers in her hair. "I'm a cat with curly hair."

Henry and Robert exchanged disgusted looks. Girls certainly started to be dumb when they were,

awfully young. (Henry Huggins, p. 138)

Besides a few short references to Beezus and "her little sister Ramona", the above quotation is the first time readers were introduced to the delightful and soon to be beloved character Ramona Quimby. Right away, we can see that this character is not flat or boring.

Whether managing to get herself "auctioned off" at a bike auction, giving Ribsy the dog a time out by shutting him in the bathroom, reminding neighbors "only you can prevent forest fires!", or

I wonder what Clemy thought about when she first appeared. I mean, did she just sort of put her in as a sort of one liner perhaps inspired by a child Clemy had actually seen in her library or neighborhood or something she remembered from her own childhood? Did she have an inkling of how significant Ramona would be in her own future writing?

boinging Susan's curls, starting up a "stop smoking" campaign for her father, going to school

with her clothes on over her pajamas, or cracking a raw egg on her head, life is always

interesting with Ramona around. In this paper, I examine more closely the character

development of Ramona Quimby by considering why and how Ramona evolved from a minor to

a major character, how the illustrations in the books show a change in Ramona's growth, how

Ramona herself feels about growing up, and how has she actually grown up.

Ramona's transition from a minor character in the Henry Huggins series into a major

character with her own series was nearly seamless. Henry Huggins is constantly hoping for

something interesting and exciting to happen, and the character Ramona provides him with many

opportunities for such excitement and out-of-the-ordinary experiences. Not only is Ramona's

character interesting; she is also humorous. Readers cannot help but laugh out loud at some of

the circumstances she puts herself and others in. We encounter a little girl who sits on empty

apple boxes to play "waiting for the bus", cuts off half of her hair because she desires to be bald

like her Uncle Jack, insists on walking around in public with bunny ears or a jump-rope monkey

tail, munches on a pound of butter, enjoys acting out commercials and storybooks, and uses a

lunch box as a camera. Ramona loves to pretend. Ramona is Ramona, and she doesn't hold back.

She may be known as the neighborhood "pest", but that doesn't stop her from being who she is.

She was Ramona Quimby, the only girl in the world with ears and whiskers on her last

initial. (Ramona the Pest, p. 147)

As the Henry Huggins series progresses, Ramona often helps Henry out of sticky

situations and begins to receive more and more attention and focus from the author, Beverly

Cleary. In *Henry and Beezus*, Ramona "untrains" Ribsy from fetching all the neighborhood

newspapers by shooting her water pistol in his eye as part of her "You're dead!" game. This

Research
Questions

or crowning herself
with a crown of burrs

I like how you
were structured
the beginning of
your paper starts
with that first glimpse
of Ramona, follow
by brief descriptions of examples
of other memorable
moments in which
the reader encounters
Ramona, then your
introduction, or
identifying the
questions you
reading did
considerations
of Ramona
are seeking to
answer

an apt example
of her
perspective of
ad lack of
self-consciousness
(such as that
exhibited by
Beezus)

helps Henry serve as a paperboy substitute for Scooter. In *Henry and the Paper Route*, Ramona helps Henry get his first paper route by pestering genius Murph out of being able to handle the job. Ramona made a huge scene screaming and fussing when Murph discovered that Ramona, complete with Murph-like glasses, was "stealing" his already delivered papers and he tried to grab the papers away from her. In *Henry and the Clubhouse*, Ramona corrects one of Henry's customers who repeatedly called Henry "Harry Higgins" Though embarrassed, Henry was grateful to Ramona because he was having a hard time telling his best customer that his name wasn't Harry. This correction ended up being especially helpful when this same customer wrote a letter to the editor praising *Henry* for his fine work as a paperboy

As Ramona's character becomes more developed and dynamic, more and more references are being made to the neighborhood pest and her name begins to even become part of the chapter headings. In the Henry Huggins series, "Ramona and the P.T.A.", "Ramona Takes Over", and "Ramona and the Clubhouse" are all chapters in these books. The last three books in the series also feature an illustration of Ramona, not Henry, on the table of contents page. In the middle of writing the Henry Huggins series, Cleary also wrote *Beezus and Ramona* in 1955 of which Ramona is a key (if not *the* key) player, and which can arguably be named the first book in the Ramona series. It is clear that Ramona truly was "taking over" both the hearts of the readers and the heart of the author.

anah's
concrete
evidence of
her growing
significance!

an excellent
point

Readers are able to relate to Ramona Quimby with ease. Being able to relate to a character is essential in order to engage and sustain a reader's attention and pleasure. Whether we have a pesty little sister, or know of a neighborhood "terror", or know what it is like to be the littlest and perhaps most misunderstood, we can all connect with Ramona and her world of imagination and wonder. We have all experienced the trials and tribulations of growing up and

I think that she's
points out how
significant to
a "cross" or "character"
who appeals equally to
male and female readers.

finding our place in the world. We know about dealing with siblings, worrying about our parents, losing teeth, wanting a best friend, struggling with school, and wondering about who we really are. We are attracted to Ramona's humor, her "innocence" and her timelessness. The Henry Huggins books and the Ramona books are still widely read today, and that can serve as a testament to Ramona's enduring character. While we can all laugh at and enjoy Ramona as a four-year-old, we are intrigued into finding out more about her and into seeing who she will grow up to be.

The illustrations by Louis Darling and Alan Tiegreen help demonstrate Ramona's development and change. The illustrations are plentiful, and they beautifully match the text. We get to see Ramona holding her lunchbox (with Ribsby's bone inside) on top of the jungle gym, the parade marching through the Quimby house the day she had a party without asking permission from her mother, her chasing and finally catching Davy to kiss him in her "baddest witch in the world" costume, her father removing the bur crown Ramona placed on her head while imitating another commercial, Beezus and Ramona struggling to prepare dinner when they complained about their mother's cooking, and baby Roberta spitting peas in Ramona's face. We witness her fusses, her scowls, her innocent-but-surely-up-to-something looks, her missing teeth, her growing taller, and her joyful smiles. We see Ramona going from wearing her coveralls without a shirt play clothes into wearing sweatshirts with jeans. All these depictions help readers better understand and connect with the text. It is almost as if we are flipping through a Ramona photo album or scrapbook.

There is a slight disconnection in the illustrated depiction of Ramona due to a change in the illustrator of Cleary's books. From *Henry Huggins* to *Ramona the Pest*, Louis Darling was the illustrator. Alan Tiegreen illustrated *Ramona the Brave* through *Ramona's World*. In a way,

to you think that this is a quality that appeals to young readers as well as adult readers?
yes
an apt description
I wonder if Darling died or stopped working as an illustrator
between *Ramona the Pest* (1968) and *Ramona the Brave* (1975)
long transition

this change of artist helps show Ramona transition from a fussy four-year-old or a baby kindergartener into a growing girl who now gets to attend school in the big brick building. Some who were comfortable with Darling's humorous and familiar illustrations may find it more difficult to accept this new "version" of Ramona. But, growing up is often hard to deal with and cannot be avoided. Ramona still has the short bob, the thin build and the expressive face.

If it would be interesting to take a look at reviews of Ramona the Brave and see if reviewers noted the change in illustrations and if so, what they said.

However, other than growing taller and wearing different clothes, it is tough to see much change in Ramona while growing up. Her face pretty much stays the same ageless Ramona. This could help keep her recognizable to readers, but can be confusing to older readers and adults interested in viewing her growth through illustration. However, we are able to observe the changes and events mentioned in the text; so in that way, the illustrations help to exhibit Ramona growing up.

As a growing child, Ramona is in awe and suspense of and is often a frustrated by the growing up process. She has her own thoughts and feelings about the whole ordeal. She worries about "doing a good job" growing up, she anticipates all the events and milestones in her life, and she contemplates the wonder of life and growing up. As a young girl, Ramona was often criticized by her older sister and grown-ups and was regularly told, "Grow up"

Although I'm not a youngest child myself, her feelings seem to reflect all I've read and heard about this experience - this is a prime example

Beezus gave her sister a look of disgust. "Ramona, grow up!"

Ramona lost all patience. "Can't you see I'm trying?" she yelled at the top of her voice.

People were always telling her to grow up. What did they think she was trying to do? (Ramona

the Brave, p. 34)

Ramona knows that being a kid, being a little sister and growing up is not easy, and she often feels misunderstood. .even to the point of believing that no one likes her and that life is unfair.

This is universal, of course, but is less painful for its commonness

[She also experiences a sort of nostalgia for her past.] She remembers her carefree kindergarten

yes, this is an emotion that I think is fairly common among children as they grow, but somehow is viewed by many as a purely adult emotion

days, she wishes that she could get away with sitting on and breaking an accordion, she wants to be cuddled and kissed on the hair. She wants grown-ups to tell her what to do and to not burden her with so much responsibility sometimes. Other times, she is more than eager to get to the next phase in life.

Despite the fact that growing up is challenging, tiresome and "the slowest thing there was, slower than even waiting for Christmas to come" (Ramona the Pest, p.14.), Ramona looks forward to excitement that her life beholds.

"She was thinking about Beezus growing up and about what it would be like to be grow up herself. She felt the way she felt when she was reading a good book. She wanted to know what would happen next. " (Ramona's World, p. 69)

Ramona gets excited about first days of school, being in that Halloween parade at school she's dreamed about since she was in nursery school, her own room, learning to read, walking by herself to school, watching after her baby sister for the first time, and so much more.

"Ramona looked forward to many things—her first loose tooth, riding a bicycle instead of a tricycle, wearing lipstick like her mother " (Ramona the Pest, p. 41)

nicely put Ramona is amazed by the intricacies of human life and by the fact that she, too, was once as tiny as helpless as her baby sister Roberta. She even sympathizes with unruly Willa Jean and is able to see herself in the little girls growing up.

She had once looked like Roberta. Amazing! She had once been that tiny, but she had grown, her hair calmed down when she remembered to comb it, and she had learned to use her eyes and hands. "You know what I think? She asked and did not wait for an answer. "I think it is hard work to be a baby " Ramona spoke as if she had discovered something unknown to the rest

of the world. With her words came unexpected love and sympathy for the tiny person in her mother's arms. (Ramona Forever, p. 180)

Ramona, as she grows in height, intelligence and wisdom is discovering the progression of life and its remarkable circular quality. She also figures out that she can succeed at life, and she can ^Wvie herself as a "potential grown-up"_A

One of the best parts about reading the Ramona series is being able to experience Ramona actually growing up. The author writes in such an intimate way as if we were really there growing up with Ramona. We see the development of her intelligence (and school progress), a change in her relationships with her peers and with her family that includes a shift from being mostly self-centered to looking out more for others, and an increase and sophistication of her awareness of self. We also are there to share in many of Ramona's developmental milestones such as losing a tooth, getting her own room, riding a bike and liking a boy

Children reading the Ramona books can relate to Ramona because they too are going through similar experiences and have similar thoughts and feelings. Adult readers may even become misty eyed like a parent who has realized their little child has grown up, and may even find themselves looking back on the stories of five-year-old Ramona (and wishing they could have more of those stories). There is a sense of wanting to both freeze time and fast-forward through time. A feeling, we can believe, Ramona would share.

In *Ramona the Pest*, Ramona is very excited about her first day of school with Miss Binney. Most of all, she wants to be able to read just like Beezus can. She learns to be patient with the learning process and starts out learning her letters and how to print her name. She insists on having a last initial even though she is the only Ramona and it is not necessary. She begins to

Ramona keeps a realistic (I think) balance between wanting to be like her peers (at least in the learning department) yet wanting to stand out

an apt description of the "reading experience"

that she should be patient with this process or at least

learn grow-up words like the one she taught herself off of billboards: *gas*, *motel* and *burger*

Soon, her world fills with words. She graduates from liking books about noisy things like steam shovels into stories of adventure and fairy tales, and she cherishes Sustained Silent Reading. She writes her first "grown-up" note to her mother asking her to come to her room after parent teacher night, and later writes her first real grown-up letter criticizing a CPA's spelling in a newspaper advertisement. This is a considerable step for Ramona given her ongoing battle with spelling. She struggles understanding why spelling is so important if people know what you mean. She maintains an aptitude for art, drawing and penmanship and continues to develop her talents throughout the books.

So do you think
that clearly
is representative
a view of "her"
now "do more
typical of younger
children's
reading -
but they
become more
interested in
imaginary
worlds as
they get
older?

Ramona's ability to relate with others also changes as the books progress. She goes from focusing mostly on herself and her own agenda to being able to sympathize with others and extend herself to her family, her friends and her peers. She also goes from needing constant approval from others to being able to accept her self more as she is. Early on in the series, Ramona thinks that everyone is always talking about her behind her back and making judgments. She wants to know what others think about her. Is she really a pest? What do her teachers think? Is she just Beezus's little sister? In *Ramona and Her Mother*, her father gives Ramona a wake-up call.

Which seems
odd for a child
who was so
uninterested
in adult
opinions of
her when
she was
young

"Someday, Ramona, you are going to have to learn that the world does not revolve around you."

(*Ramona and Her Mother*, p.188)

She begins to realize she has a role to play in her family. At first, it is just to get along with pesky Willa Jean, but she soon realizes the importance of other responsibilities, especially when she becomes an older sister. She is very concerned with making sure that her family is happy, and she goes out of her way to do what she can to make that happen, whether she makes

them laugh, entertains the idea of earning a million dollars by making commercials when her father loses his job, or reading nursery rhymes to baby Roberta. She learns the importance of friendship from Howie and her best friend Daisy. She starts being nice to all too perfect Susan, even though Susan gets on her nerves. She even develops her first real crush on Danny (also known as Yard Ape), and offers some of her birthday cake to his friends and him. Her world is expanding and is growing bigger by reaching out to others.

I like it when Ramona and Howie play "Brick Factory"

Ramona goes from being Beezus's little sister to being a more complex character. At first, she struggles with self-awareness and with the constancy of her character. In *Ramona the Pest*, she becomes worried that no one knows who she is underneath her Halloween costume. She is afraid of losing her identity.

No, Miss Binney wasn't the one who was frightened. Ramona was. Miss Binney did not know who this witch was. Nobody knew who Ramona was, and if nobody knew who she was, she wasn't anybody (Ramona the Pest, p. 142)

She experiences a similar paranoia when she wears makeup on her nose in order to make herself a sheep for the Christmas pageant in *Ramona and Her Father*. By the end of the series, though, Ramona does not experience such anxiety when she dresses up as a princess with her best friend Daisy. At the age of nine (almost ten), she knows that she will remain Ramona. .forever.

Pages upon pages could be written about the classic milestones that Ramona experiences throughout the series. She experiences her first lost tooth, her first best friend, her first crush, and her first bike ride. Her father loses his job, and her mother has to go to work full time; so she experiences her first money anxieties. She becomes a big sister and a cat sitter. She is challenged to get along with her teacher and to better understand grown-ups. She realizes that no one is

This is something that is pretty common in the lives of children (realizing that their teacher and themselves do not see eye to eye but also knowing that the teacher is the one who is ultimately in charge, thus the child must strategize on how to make this work)

perfect. She stops throwing tantrums and starts being a good role model for Roberta and Willa Jean. Ramona grows up.

In the Henry Huggins and the Ramona books, readers witness a little girl named Ramona Quimby grow up from being the neighborhood pest whose world is centered around herself and her own pleasure into a responsible and sympathetic "zero-teen" We observe her develop from a minor character into a protagonist, we follow her growth through illustrations, we become aware of her inner thoughts and feelings about growing up, and we experience the delights and the difficulties of growing up right along with her. We have no doubt that whatever happens, Ramona will end up okay She is, after all, lovable Ramona Quimby, "the only girl in the world with ears and whiskers on her last initial"

"Growing up is hard work," said Mr. Quimby as he drove away from the hospital. "Sometimes being a grown-up is hard work."

"I know," said Ramona and thought some more. She thought about loose teeth, real sore throats, quarrels, misunderstandings with her teachers, longing for a bicycle her family could not afford, worrying when her parents bickered, how terrible she had felt when she hurt Beezus's feelings without meaning to, and all the long afternoons when Mrs. Kemp looked after her until her mother came home from work. She had survived it all. "Isn't it funny?" she remarked as her father steered the car into their driveway (Ramona Forever, p. 180-181)

A Jennifer - You're done a very fine job here dissecting Ramona's life and experiences out of the 14 books that include her AS you note, there is so much more to say about her (and your analysis of her maturing process) than you have room for in this paper IF you think you would like to explore this →

The Henry Huggins and Ramona Series

By Beverly Cleary

Chronology

Henry Huggins, 1950

Henry and Beezus, 1952

Henry and Ribsy, 1954

Beezus and Ramona, 1955

Henry and the Paper Route, 1957

Henry and the Clubhouse, 1962

Ribsy, 1964

Ramona the Pest, 1968

Ramona the Brave, 1975

Ramona and Her Father, 1977

Ramona and Her Mother, 1979

Ramona Quimby, Age 8, 1981

Ramona Forever, 1984

Ramona's World, 1999