

## The Search for a Voice as a Major Theme in Lauri Halse Anderson's *Speak*

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### ***Abstract:***

The aim of this paper is to show how Melinda, the protagonist of Lauri Halse Anderson's *Speak* (1999), struggles to form identity as a voice in her society despite the crises she survives, especially rape. The major theme is her search for identity; the effort to build a voice under the pressures and difficulties she lives with, and her struggle against violence.

*Speak* tells the story of Melinda Sordino, a ninth grader at Merryweather High School in Syracuse, New York. Melinda and her closest friends attend a party with seniors and beer before her freshman year. At the party, Melinda feels

uncomfortable and out of place. She gulps down a couple of beers before walking outside for some fresh air. While outside, Melinda meets Andy Evans, an attractive senior boy. Andy begins dancing with and kissing Melinda, and Melinda is taken aback but too drunk to say anything. Andy pushes her to the ground and rapes her. In her confusion afterward, Melinda dials 911 and the police arrive at the party, but Melinda finds herself unable to tell anyone what happened. When the entire school discovers that Melinda broke up the party and got some students arrested, her friends stop speaking to her. No one knows that she was raped. She receives angry glares from strangers.

She decides that just speaking hurts her, and remains mostly silent. She slips into depression and finds an abandoned janitor's closet and makes it her sanctuary.

Because of Melinda's strong internal voice, it is clear that she is not a naturally weak person. On the contrary, she is witty and smart, astutely observing those around her. Thus *Speak* can be seen not as the story of a girl growing stronger, but of an already strong girl overcoming depression. It is a story of a girl who finds her voice

#### **Key Words:**

Speak - الصوت Voice - الهوية Identity  
- الاكتئاب Depression - التحدث  
- العنف النفسى Psychological Violence  
- التأثير النفسى Psychological Effects  
Psychological - الاكتشاف Discovery  
Pressures and Difficulties الضغوط  
المراهق Adolescent - والصعوبات النفسية  
- الاغتصاب Rape - الرشيد Adult

#### **المخلص**

لورى هالس أندرسون هى أديبة أمريكية ولدت عام ١٩٦١، اشتهرت بكتابة روايات الأطفال وصغار السن، وقد اغتنمت جوائز عديدة لإسهاماتها فى كتابة أدب الطفل .

يهدف البحث إلى عرض فكرة الهوية والبحث عنها، وتحليل هذه الفكرة فى رواية (تكلمى!) للورى هالس أندرسون وكيف تطور مفهوم هذا المعنى من خلال الظروف المحيطة فى المجتمع من وجهة نظر المرأة، وكيف أن هذا المفهوم يختلف من ثقافة إلى أخرى . يهدف البحث أيضا إلى كيفية تأثير الأحداث على تشكيل الهوية وتأكيد الذات من خلال خلط الثقافات بعضها ببعض، ومواجهة كل ما هو كئيب وحزين فى الدولة ومحاولة الفرد (وبخاصة المرأة) إعادة هيكلة هويته مرة أخرى وذلك عن طريق الجهر بالصوت والتحدث دائما لمجابهة العنف والاضطهاد .

يخلص البحث إلى كيفية معاناة الفرد فى تشكيل هويته وبالذات الهوية النسائية عندما تواجه المرأة العديد من صور العنف، ومنها الاغتصاب . إن المراهقات فى حالة دائمة إلى

التغيير وعندما تم اغتصاب ميليندا جسديا  
ونفسيا ظهر الكثير على شخصيتها، ومنها أنها  
قوية بالفعل وليست ضعيفة حيث إن لديها صوتاً  
ولكنه ليس صوتاً ظاهراً بل هو بداخلها يتردد من  
وقت إلى آخر. إذًا ليس بالضروري أن يرتفع  
الصوت ليسمعه الناس، بل يمكن أن يكون  
صوت الفرد النابع من داخله أقوى بكثير.

The aim of this paper is to show how Melinda, the protagonist of Lauri Halse Anderson's *Speak* (1999), struggles to form identity as a voice in her society despite the crises she survives, especially rape. The major theme is her search for identity; the effort to build a voice under the pressures and difficulties she lives with, and her struggle against violence.

It is not only Melinda who searches for herself: Merryweather High School and several other characters get named, renamed, or nicknamed through the course of the novel. As Melinda figures out who

and what she is, so too, does the school; Merryweather High School unites most of the student body and allows Melinda to feel part of something during the school year.

*Speak* tells the story of Melinda Sordino, a ninth grader at Merryweather High School in Syracuse, New York. Melinda and her closest friends attend a party with seniors and beer before her freshman year. At the party, Melinda feels uncomfortable and out of place. She gulps down a couple of beers before walking outside for some fresh air. While outside, Melinda meets Andy Evans, an attractive senior boy. Andy begins dancing with and kissing Melinda, and Melinda is taken aback but too drunk to say anything. Andy pushes her to the ground and rapes her. In her confusion afterward, Melinda dials 911 and the police arrive at the party, but Melinda finds herself unable to tell anyone what

happened. When the entire school discovers that Melinda broke up the party and got some students arrested, her friends stop speaking to her. No one knows that she was raped. She receives angry glares from strangers. She decides that just speaking hurts her, and remains mostly silent. She slips into depression and finds an abandoned janitor's closet and makes it her sanctuary.

Initially, Melinda is befriended by Heather, a new girl from Ohio. However, Heather is eager to be a part of the social scene and she soon joins a clan known as "the Marthas". Heather realizes that having Melinda as a friend hurts her social reputation, and she tells Melinda that they can no longer spend time together. As Melinda sinks deeper into depression, she begins to skip class. Her parents and teachers notice, but believe that it is just a

phase. Only her art teacher, Mr. Freeman, observes Melinda's depressed state. He encourages her to use her voice and shows interest in her artwork. Melinda also befriends her lab partner, David Petrakis. Like Mr. Freeman, David urges Melinda to speak up.

Over the course of the school year, the story of Melinda's experience unfolds. She begins to admit to herself what happened and gradually stops running away from the memory of it. She still, however, remains silent. In the spring, her former best friend, Rachel, begins to date Andy Evans. Horrified by this, Melinda knows that she must warn Rachel about the danger of spending time with Andy. Melinda opens up to Rachel about the rape by exchanging notes with her in the library. Rachel is receptive until Melinda names Andy the perpetrator, at which point she

angrily leaves the room. However, Rachel does, in fact, listen to Melinda's story. The next weekend, she publicly leaves and humiliates Andy at the prom.

The following week, Melinda decides she is ready to move out of her janitor's closet. She no longer feels like hiding. While she is cleaning it out, however, Andy enters and locks her in the room with him. Angry that she talked to Rachel, Andy attempts to rape Melinda a second time. This time, however, Melinda screams and fights back. The lacrosse team hears Melinda's cries and rescues her from Andy. By the next day, everyone knows Andy and Melinda's history.

In the last chapter of the novel, Melinda sits in Mr. Freeman's room on the final day of school finishing up her yearlong art project. After she turns it in, Mr. Freeman gives her an A+. He says that he knows she has

been through a lot. Prompted by this statement, Melinda decides to tell Mr. Freeman her entire story. The Melinda we see at the end of the novel is not the same Melinda who arrived, friendless, on her first day of ninth grade. This Melinda is ready to accept what happened and is prepared to seek help. This Melinda speaks.

*Speak* is not just Melinda's powerful story, but the story of a whole school. We can see the parallel narratives of both Melinda and Merryweather School's search for identity, each of which contributes to the success of the other. Indeed, the parallel identity search employed by Anderson contributes to the text's wholeness, its richness, and its successful use in the classroom. These parallel searches for identity also emerge as a deliberate part of the structure of the novel.

Merryweather High School becomes a character in the novel. By

charting the stages of the school's identity, we see how Melinda feels part of a group, during this yearlong search. She identifies with the school. Once she finds her safe space, the closet, she begins to find her voice and shape her own identity at the school. She even develops a sense of posterity; the closet in some future time will aid and shelter another voiceless student. Thus the school can help heal. Linking Melinda's identity issues to those of the school as a whole creates a tightly woven novel which is stylistically and thematically coherent and evenly written and balanced.

From the novel's very beginning, we see the convergence of these two narratives of identity – Melinda's and the school's. Melinda begins her journey through ninth grade before school begins, before the first bell has even sounded: the

journey starts on the humiliating state to school in which she is friendless and, even though she is picked up first and has the whole bus to navigate, knows she has no place to sit. In fact, as early as the bottom of the first page of the novel, Melinda reveals the problem with the school mascot. When she arrives on school grounds that first day of ninth grade, she writes of passing the janitors who are "painting over the sign in front of the high school" (*Speak* 3), the one that had read Merryweather Trojans. She goes on to explain that the school board objected to them being the Trojans because "Merryweather High – Home of the Trojans – didn't send a strong enough abstinence message" (4). This observation begins not only the novel but also Melinda's reporting on the yearlong struggle between the students and the religiously conservative school

board/administration/PTA over the name of the mascot, which changes several times through the course of the year. At different points in the novel, they become the Devils, the Tigers, the Wombats, the Hornets, and back to Trojans.

Melinda introduces the second part of the novel by asking for audience participation : "Go \_\_\_\_\_ (Fill In The Blank) !" (49). The "fill in the blank" moment by Anderson is clever: it simultaneously asks one to provide something in the presence of emptiness while noting that the very act of providing it is itself the joke and the answer. One could also literally speak out loud "Go Fill In The Blank" while reading, thus making it a kind of cheer in and of itself: the school becomes the "fill in the blanks". The reader is not actually supposed to write anything in that space, but the blankness also does

create a mental bridge to Melinda's condition. The school is rendered "blank" – voiceless, invisible – by the overzealousness of its abstinence – emphasizing school board, paralleling Melinda's invisibility and search for identity in a hostile rape culture. As outcast, blanked, rendered invisible by the kids who populate her high school. This, too, starts on the first school bus ride to ninth grade and the first page of the novel, where people whisper and point at her all the while denying her any right to exist. She has been erased, but the whispering and pointing encourage her to exist, in fact demand that she have a named place, Melinda. In other words, they legitimize her even as they think they deny her identity. Melinda begins to find comfort in this forced invisibility, and she even begins to seek it out, although she heads to the hospital when she plays hooky in school "The hospital is the perfect

place to be invisible", Melinda says (111).

Since she cannot be invisible, she opts to try for unseen and unheard. She plays at being sick throughout the novel, so it comes as no surprise that when she skips school and misses the small stop on the bus because she fell asleep, she turns to the one place where people are not playing at being sick, they really are sick. She is reassured by her own health and quickly tires of the hospital smell and ambience "I put the gown back. There is nothing wrong with me. These are really sick people, sick that you can see" (113). Her muteness is not only a function of her literal inability to speak, but also of her need to blend in and not cause any more trouble, even among the staff at school.

She meets Mr. Neck, whom Melinda first calls a predator, the first

day of school at an assembly when he has to tell her to sit. Later, as the teacher in her social studies class, he remembers the incident earlier in the day and again directs where she will sit "I've got my eye on you" he says, "Front row" (7). Melinda will also be under Mr. Neck's observation at detention. Before she is even named to him, he marks her as trouble, which she is not. Though she tries, Melinda is not anonymous and exists even as a freshman even on her first day. The name of the teacher is a reference to an old-fashioned term for teen kissing, "necking", and his blaming of her for no reason is another manifestation of the school's victim-blaming culture. The search for a mascot continues while Melinda both tries and does not try to fit in at school.

After Halloween, the school board christens the school the Tigers,



not liking the religious and behavioral implications of the Devils. Melinda then notes that a very successful PR campaign run by the Ecology Club, complete with posters of the endangered species, succeeds in removing Tigers as the official mascot. The school then has a democratic assembly to come up with a new mascot; "this result in a school widens election to choose from the bees, the Icebergs, the Hill toppers, and the Wombats" (50).

The Wombats receive the most votes (though only 53 out of 1,547 students vote [p. 69] ). Principal Principal, Melinda's nickname for the Principal whose name we never learn, decides to get rid of the Wombats and to do away with democracy altogether: they become the Merryweather Hornets by decree. Then the PTA starts a petition to get rid of the Hornets because of the "Hornet Hustle" (141), a cheer the

cheerleaders chant at sporting events that is deemed inappropriate and even gets broadcast on the local news, embarrassing the school. But the student council counter - petitions the PTA to remain the Hornets. In the counter- petition, the Honors society, on behalf of the student body, documents the "psychological harm" the students have suffered due to "this year's lack of identity" (141).

They sound persuasive. But they also ring true, given what Melinda suffers as a result of the sexual assault. Melinda takes care in relating the struggles the school endures to select a mascot, to have an identity. Her constant reporting of this issue can be seen as just one of many dominant social narratives she observes all around her.

She understands the tree metaphor that peppers the novel and her art project, and she certainly understands the lesson her art teacher,

Mr. Freeman, imparts to her about Cubism – or at least she applies it intelligently to her own life, even as Mr. Freeman knows very little about her. But as the mascot issue is debated and resolved, Melinda gradually finds herself part of a network of other ninth graders, of other high school students, who feel this injustice deeply, more so than Melinda, and who also feel disenfranchised by the administration and the school board who have abandoned democratic ideals and activities (such as the election) in favor of what can only feel like tyranny to the young students. As the students rally around the school's lack of identity, Melinda will hesitatingly participate, while she also begins to find herself. Readers of the novel map Melinda's identity search coupled with the school's search.

Melinda reports on the events of the school's search for a mascot with her trademark irony and distance, yet her tone and language betray her: she cares and is as engrossed by this search for identity as any other student. "This is the only thing talked about at school," she reports, "especially during class" (41). The students and Melinda do not seem to care about anything other than this discussion, the subsequent special forum and the vote equalize the school. Though this struggle will have the greatest repercussions for the cheerleaders who have to keep trying to rhyme the new noun in new cheers, Melinda personalizes the school's search for a mascot, for a name.

Melinda enjoys this narrative of the school's search for identity because she participates in the process, because it makes her feel part of something. She attends the

school forum to vote on the name, she regularly punctuates her narrative with updates on the name problem, and she finds in the school a version of her own search for an identity where nothing fits. Though she accidentally attends a basketball game when she stumbles upon the noise in the gym, she gets caught up in the display of camaraderie and the unaccustomed feeling of victory as the school wins by one point. Melinda comments on how infectious the feelings generated by the win are and how she became childlike in her shared glee. She says, "The noise of the gym pulls me in ... I get caught up in the excitement and clap like a girl" (130 – 131). This excitement enables her to momentarily consider David Petrakis' offer to hang out at his house after the game for pizza. But she does not go and ends up walking home instead, having a dialogue between her two selves,

called Melinda One and Melinda Two, about whether she should have gone and about whether or not David had ulterior motives in asking her. The feeling of belonging is fleeting. It could have continued at David's house, but Melinda opts to cut it off. This leads her to go shopping at the discount department store where her mother works. She finds this humiliating because she cannot afford the designer labels of the Marthas, and she doesn't have the sense of haute couture that Rachel/Rachelle adopts. She is also obliged to work there during school vacations, which marks Melinda as lower on the socioeconomic scale. With all that doesn't "fit", however, the symbolic search for the school's name does fit Melinda's search for herself and her voice, and she takes note of each time a label or cause does not fit her. In the move from grades eight to nine, she has lost her clan, the Plain Janes, as

each member (Rachel/Rachelle, Ivy, Nicole, and Jessica, who moved to Nevada and is never heard from again) gets reconstituted in the shuffle to high school. The girls recalibrate their social status after Melinda calls the police from Kyle Rodger's party. Her friends don't know Andy raped her, and she winds up being ostracized, not fitting in anymore. In an interview about the novel, Anderson comments on the notion of being clanless, on what it feels like to be Melinda. Anderson says, "when you don't know who you are, your clan provides an identity. When you don't have a clan, you're sunk" (Anderson, 2000, 26).

Melinda's lack of identity is constantly reaffirmed. Even Principal Principal, in the meeting with Melinda's parents, calls her Melissa (114). Melinda is also called Mell by David Petrakis, Mellie by Anderson

in her "Speaking Out" interview (26), and Melinda One and Melinda Two in some of her own internal dialogues. Rather than view the latter example as any type of psychopathology, we see Melinda's dialogue with her two selves as a real expression of tension and concern about whether or not to go to David's house after the basketball game. When Melinda has this dialogue with her two selves at this moment in the novel, it comes across as in character and perfectly ordinary within the narrative. She is pulled in both directions, wanting to go and be social and wanting to retreat into herself.

Even Melinda may be confused about who is at points. Rachel/Rachelle has certainly grown up in the transition to high school: she is dating a senior, wears make up, and hangs out with the foreign exchange students. Melinda, by contrast, still

lives in a childishly decorated room and longingly recalls the childhood memories when Rachel/Rachelle was just Rachel. While playing hooky from school at the mall, Melinda further indicates that she just wants "to be in fifth grade again" (99), presumably a time when things were simpler.

A whole other part of her journey, though it is muted in the novel, chronicles that transition between middle/junior high and high school. In many ways, Melinda, though now technically sexually experienced, still childishly clings to her past and her innocence. This is in direct contrast to Rachel/Rachelle, to Mr. Neck, gym class, lab partners you may or may not trust, and the high school cafeteria, all of which require navigation and survival skills Melinda has not quite mastered yet. Almost every character in the school suffers a nickname bestowed by Melinda,

except a handful of teachers: Mrs. Keen, the biology teacher; Mr. Stetman, the Algebra teacher; and the gym teacher who wants Melinda to trade her successful foul-shooting secret to the boys' team. In fact, Melinda's use of nicknames gives rise to many of the comic moments in the novel. Kids and authority figures alike get named or renamed by Melinda, often because of a personal tic or characteristic, sometimes just because of their function. English is taught by Hair Hairwoman (who does have a transformation [haircut] at the end and should rightly earn a new nickname), and THE BEAST, or IT, Andy Evans, Principal Principal, Guidance Counselor, and Librarian are other adults who populate Melinda's world and are defined by their roles. Rachel becomes Rachelle in an attempt to be cool and though Mr. Freeman does not technically have a nickname, his name itself hints

at the role he plays in the novel by dictating his purpose.

The comic effect of the Principal's name being repeated twice each and every time he appears initially registers the lack of respect Melinda and the other kids have for him. He is just another nameless figure of authority. Melinda does not escape the (re)naming. She, too, has been renamed by herself, with help from others. The novel opens with Melinda's identity at once lost, by her own pronouncement: "I am Outcast" (4), she says on the novel's second page, with a capital O.

The novel's insistence upon and attention to naming and renaming equalizes the students, faculty, and the school itself because no one escapes. Anderson demonstrates how the search for name, for identity, is caught up in other searches. Everyone's name seems to fit – either

how they see themselves or how others see them – and the clan like registry we observed earlier reinforces status and functionality.

Melinda's naming of herself also helps to set the plot in motion. Children's and young adult literature chronicle plenty of outcast protagonists who just do not seem to fit in with any crowd for superficial or documented reasons. Though there does not have to be a reason for Melinda to be an outcast in ninth grade, there is. She called the cops and broke up the party she and Rachel went to during the summer before ninth grade. She reports she did not intend to get people in trouble; she just did not know what to do after being raped.

That night, Melinda walked home to an empty house. Indeed, one of the great mysteries of the novel concerns where her parents were that

night. Melinda reports that their cars were gone, leading the reader to believe that not only were they out of the house, but they went out separately. This is never referred to again, but it does clue the reader into the home dynamics of the family. Though not the perfect picture of a functional and loving family, they do not seem on the brink of divorce, even though Melinda speculates that they would be if she had not been born (70). She does indicate she is just like them: "an ordinary drone dressed in secrets and lies" (70). Melinda does not seem to question where they were, suggesting that she does not care and that perhaps this kind of behavior from them is normal or common. The absent parents are not even silent witnesses to their daughter's trauma, though they do buy her paints for Christmas, and Melinda remarks that they must have noticed her interest in drawing.

Melinda is outcast at home as well; literally, she is as alone at home as she was the night of the rape.

This isolation is emphasized repeatedly and almost immediately and serves to make the reader feel sorry for Melinda. When Melinda first finds her janitor's closet – what will become her safe space until Andy Evans finds her and attacks her there – she also connects the physical space with the idea of identity and naming. She says, "The closet is abandoned – it has no purpose, no name. It is the perfect place for me" (26). What is useless and functionless becomes the proper fit for her, in her estimation. Decaying, moldy, and smelly, untouched for years, this closet is where Melinda begins to find herself.

Melinda frequently hides in the supply closet at her school. This symbolizes her need to hide from the world. It also represents her isolation, not just how she isolates herself but

also that she feels her friends have isolated her. The closet is a secret place, reflecting the secret of the rape. Later, when her rapist has been exposed, she stops hiding in the closet, showing that she doesn't need to hide the rape anymore.

The writer uses symbolism as a literary device to express meaning, most clearly in the novel as Lips and Mouth. Numerous descriptions of Melinda's lips and mouth in the novel underscore Melinda's inability to speak after the rape. For much of the story, Melinda's lips are described as cracked, swollen and dry. The ugliness of her mouth represents the ugliness and shame she feels inside as well as her inability to take care of herself. Later, as Melinda begins to heal and learns to speak about the rape, the condition of her lips improves.

As Melinda's sense of identity begins to emerge, she also gives her janitor's closet an identity that reflects her own. She transforms the closet into a lighter and brighter space of hope, triumph, and resistance; ultimately, it will become the only place she can comfortably sleep. It will also become her own private art gallery as her projects occupy its shelves and her drawings line its walls, a reminder of her yearlong creativity, struggle, but ultimate productivity in art class. Studying the multiple identity searches in the novel reveals how tightly wound and symmetrically plotted the novel is. When Melinda is ready to say goodbye to ninth grade and move out from or out of her closet, she considers leaving it, now new and safe, to the next inhabitant. Minutes before Andy's second attack, which Melinda of course cannot foresee, she



says "Who knows, some other kids may need a safe place to run to next year" (192). Even on the brink of Andy's second attack as the closet is in danger of becoming unsafe, Melinda saves herself and the closet by saying no and fighting back. She is also protecting the innocence and purity of the closet, which is under attack just as Melinda is.

One of the most common ways of reading Anderson's book is that it concerns found empowerment, whether it is because of Melinda's trauma or simply because she is a teen girl. Sally Smith, in her review of the book, suggests, "Melinda's silence, while extreme, is emblematic of the silence that often afflicts girls as they enter adolescence and the comparatively impersonal, competitive atmosphere of secondary school" (585).

In their book *Discovering Their Voices: Engaging Adolescent Girls*

with *Young Adult Literature*, Marsha Sprague and Kara Keeling contend, "The theme of the book centers on Melinda's loss of identity because of the trauma she has endured. She slowly loses the ability to speak as she sinks deeper and deeper into despair" (6). Sprague and Keeling make the connection between this book and girl identity in general by evoking Erik Erickson: "Erickson argues that the primary role of adolescence is to create an identity, thus avoiding role confusion ... This summarizes, for most of us, our general understanding of adolescence: a search for who we are, for where we fit in" (1). This, they argue, is the very process Melinda goes through in *Speak* that is, struggling with whom she is as she finds the strength to talk about her trauma. It strikes them that this "empowerment narrative", as they might call it – this triumphant search for personal identity that *Speak*

presumably offers – is very appealing for many adult readers, and one reason they feel the book is worth recommending to teens.

Melinda's awareness of power is sophisticated and profound. In a very revealing passage early in the book, she notes: "It is easier not to say anything. Shut your trap; button your lip, can it. All that crap you hear on TV about communication and expressing feelings is a lie. Nobody really wants to hear what you have to say" (*Speak* 9). This statement becomes Melinda's deepest insight of the book: power demands that you speak, but it demands that you speak its truth rather than your own. If it is true, as Marnina Gonick put it recently, that the novel "presents girls as vulnerable, voiceless, and fragile" (2), Anderson is careful to show that as much as Melinda struggles, she is none of these things for purely a

victim. Nor is she purely powerless. In fact, she finds strength despite her lack of a traditional "voice".

It is not simply that Melinda is struggling for the right, official name for what happened, or even what Herman calls the event's "true name". For Melinda, language is imprecise in capturing the event itself, "let alone the emotions connected with it". As Melinda recalls what happened when she was raped in a long scene she titles "A Night to Remember", we encounter the first moment in the book where syntax, sentence structure, and language simply fall apart, all in one sentence. Aspects of the event are held together without punctuation. The first period of her description, or for that matter grammar of any sort other than exclamation points, occurs at the end of this section, after the event happens. In some places events are

broken apart by white space and a significant page break in the paperback edition. Melinda recalls: Elaine Scarry describes "the difficulty of expressing physical pain" (3); she argues that "Whatever pain achieves, I'm trying to remember how we got it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this on the ground and unsharability through its resistance to where the moon went and wham! unsharability through its resistance to language" (4). Scarry also remarks, "tendency of pain not simply to resist and No! – I'm not expression but to destroy the capacity really here, I'm definitely back at for speech altogether" (54). Although Rachel's crimping my most of Melinda's narration up to this hair and gluing on fake nails, and point in the novel has been largely he smells like beer and fragmentary and nonlinear, her mean and he hurts me hurts me description of the rape here seems hurts me and gets up and particularly "unsharable", to use zips his jeans and smiles (135- Scarry's word – something much 36). different than simply implying that

Herman writes, "Traumatic memories have a number of unusual Melinda constructs several qualities. They are not encoded like theatrical dialogues throughout the the ordinary memories of adults in a book, presented in script format, verbal, linear narrative that is where this is elaborated. When it is assimilated into an ongoing life story" her turn to speak, we see only the (37). In *The Body In Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, word "Me" with a colon followed by blank white space on the page. In this

way Melinda occupies no space on the page, to the eternal frustration of the adults around her who demand she say something, anything. At these moments Melinda is simultaneously fulfilling the role that has been assigned to her by adults and a place of power. Melinda also knows that standard answers don't suffice here.

Melinda's parents frequently show her kindness, including presenting her with a sketchbook for Christmas in recognition of her newfound interest in art, and Melinda often strives to tell them exactly what has happened to her. Thus, it would be wrong to suggest that either Melinda is simply a snotty teen who hates her parents and won't talk or that her parents are neglectful villains who give her no opportunity to communicate. Instead, what these bits of dialogue dramatize is how power is often built into the most everyday bits

of communication between adult and teen and works to assign each designated roles and prescribed responses. In these and other moments, Anderson is also willing to acknowledge the particularly unstable nature of identity via the sophisticated depictions of Melinda's "self" in the book, whether it is constructed through language or a product of a fragmented self.

In the novel the only adult Melinda does respond to is Mr. Freeman – a male art teacher who, much like Melinda, has a great deal of problems with authority. Mr. Freeman has Melinda work on drawing trees, a metaphor so important that it appears on the cover of the book as an easy signifier for growth. When introduced to Picasso by Mr. Freeman, Melinda remarks, "Cubism. Seeing beyond what is on the surface. Moving both the eyes and a nose to the side of the

face. Dicing bodies and tables and guitars as if they were celery sticks, and rearranging them so that you really have to see them. Amazing. What did the world look like to him"(119).

Trees are one of the most prevalent symbols in the novel, appearing in almost every chapter of the book. Trees represent life and growth for Melinda. In the beginning of the novel, Melinda is assigned to draw trees for a yearlong art project. She struggles to draw realistic trees, frustrated that she "can't bring it to life". This represents her depression and struggle. Later, a scene where men cut away a dead branch from a tree in order to save the rest of the tree symbolizes the danger Melinda faces in letting her pain overtake every aspect of her life. As Melinda begins to heal, her tree drawings become richer and more detailed, symbolizing her own growth.

Melinda seems to struggle with producing the standard, cohesive narrative we would get in the novel. Instead the book features a jumpy, incoherent, cut up narrative that reflects Melinda's mindset, which interestingly, carries over to her body – she digs into her skin with a paperclip and bites into her lips with her teeth. Later in the novel, standing in front of a three way mirror at her mother's clothing store and seeing reflection after reflection of herself, Melinda wonders, "Am I in there somewhere ?" (124). She notes, "My face becomes a Picasso sketch, my body slicing into dissecting cubes" (124).

Melinda avoids mirrors after the rape, unable to face her own reflection. This represents her inability to face her feelings. She narrates that she can't "see herself", which shows that her sense of identity has been altered by the rape. The only

mirror where she feels that she can see herself is a three-way mirror in a store's dressing room. The fractured reflection represents Melinda's fractured sense of self.

The choice of narrative style Melinda employs to tell her story, therefore, is significant. Herman notes, "People who have survived atrocities often tell their stories in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner which undermines their credibility and thereby serves the twin imperatives of truth telling and secrecy" (1). It is hard not to see the same thing happening with Melinda. *Speak* seems to offer the same potential through its jumpy format. Melinda is in fact often very adept at redirecting the reader's gaze in multiple directions at once, having the reader contemplate what seems, on the surface at least, to be unrelated. The

following is a particularly fascinating example, taking place while Mr. Freeman drives Melinda home one afternoon: "You did a good job with that Cubist sketch", he says. I don't know what to say. We pass a dead dog. It doesn't have a collar. "I'm seeing a lot of growth in your work. You are learning more than you know." (121). This quick scene provides a great portrait of the novel in miniature. Mr. Freeman, the wise and caring adult, seemingly knows more about Melinda and her growth than she does, something we would expect of almost any young adult novel in which the teen is struggling with a sense of self. Yet, once again, Melinda doesn't "know what to say" and instead turns her gaze toward something else, in this case a dead dog without a collar. The dog, again, provides another metaphor for those who have no "clan" to protect them –

the absence of a collar indicates that the dog belonged to no one, leading, one infers, to its death, alone and unburied.

Trites remarks that for most young adult novels, "adults hold the knowledge that represents the highest goal: truth. No adolescent is given the opportunity to be as wise" (79). This is particularly evident in the book's culmination when Melinda speaks to her male art teacher about her rape. Although our sympathy is clearly with Melinda while she sits in the Principal's office in the scene described above, Anderson cannot help but make the title of her book an imperative verb, demanding that Melinda eventually speak. Whatever Anderson may have set up in the rest of the book, it becomes quickly evident that this was her real purpose all along when Melinda finally says aloud at the end of the book, "Me: 'Let me tell you about it'" (*Speak* 198).

When Melinda utters these final words, she is telling for a number of reasons. Foucault writes of the confession: The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile; a ritual in which the truth is corroborated by the obstacles and resistances it has had to surmount in order to

be formulated ((61-62).

In the clever setting of the school library, with a particularly overzealous librarian insisting they not speak aloud, Melinda chooses to write down on paper what happened to her, for the first time vocalizing (without voice) the rape, and thereby making it official. She writes, "I didn't call the cops to break up the party, I called – I put the pencil down. I pick it up again – I called them because some guy raped me. Under the trees. I didn't know what to do. I was stupid and I was drunk and I didn't know what was happening and then he hurt – I scribbled that out – raped me" (*Speak* 183).

This rewriting is an important step for Melinda in more ways. Here Melinda refines her statement from the more apt and inclusive "he hurt me" , a repeatable phrase that re-enacts what happened to her, to the

more clinical and official "he raped me". It is a refinement that marks a significant shift in how Melinda deals with her trauma. She turns from internal struggle to external vocalization, building to the last page when Melinda finally articulates, in the most official, declarative means possible, "It happened. There is no avoiding it, no forgetting. No running away, or flying, or burying. Andy Evans raped me in August when I was drunk and too young to know what was happening. It wasn't my fault. He hurt me. It wasn't my fault. He hurt me. It wasn't my fault. And I am not going to let it kill me. I can grow" (198).

For many readers of the book, Melinda can be quite frustrating. While they are pleased she has finally spoken aloud, it is surprisingly easy to blame Melinda for not talking – for not just pointing out the guy who did



it, telling her parents, and in turn moving past what happened. For some readers, it starts to feel like "it is Melinda's fault that she is suffering because it takes her so long to say anything" (183). Piper offers in *Reviving Ophelia* that what in fact frustrates many students is how long it takes her to finally speak up and how this is a sign of weakness on her part (15-16). Yet, as Foucault describes it, what makes the confession so powerful, and most importantly truthful, is precisely those "obstacles and resistances it has had to surmount in order to be formulated" (62).

According to Anderson's logic, it is not until the very last sentence of the book that Melinda speaks to someone who might be able to help her, and it isn't until the last page where Melinda finally articulates what happened. Anderson certainly seems to suggest that

Melinda is at her strongest at these last moments, perhaps even stronger than the courage it took to physically take on her attacker in an earlier scene.

Through Melinda's flashbacks, we learn the details of the rape that threatens to destroy her life. The emotional journey we are reading stems from that experience. The flashbacks help Melinda realize that she needs to start talking about the rape if she gets past it. They also, obviously, allow the reader to discover what it is that happened to Melinda to mess her up so badly. The story is told primarily in the present tense, over the course of Melinda's freshman year of high school. This aspect of the style helps us get caught up in the emotions and the action, as if we were there with Melinda, experiencing the same inner and outer torments.

Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*

is a novel that makes a definite argument. The title gives us a pretty big hint as to what this might be. In short, the novel argues that if you are a victim of a sexual assault, you will need to speak about it in order to heal. Furthermore, you need to report your attacker. Hopefully, reporting the attacker will make it less likely he or she will hurt you, or other people, again. For Melinda, it would have been very difficult to heal if she hadn't had the courage to finally start telling people that Andy Evans raped her. Her silence is something she hides behind out of fear and shame, among other reasons. After she passes out during frog dissection in biology class, she thinks, "The whole point of not talking about it, of silencing the memory, is to make it go away. It won't. I'll need brain surgery to cut it out of my head" (38).

Melinda is constantly being urged to speak, often by imagining people talking to her. For example, when Melinda feverishly imagines daytime talk show hosts giving her advice, she hears Jerry Springer telling her, "Speak up [...], Melinda, I can't hear you !" (76). The real people in Melinda's life are also urging her to talk. Mr. Freeman, Melinda's art teacher, is the only adult who can clearly see that Melinda is holding a secret that's tearing her apart. He encourages her to express her emotion through art and to speak her secrets out loud.

David Petrakis, Melinda's lab partner in science class, might or might not realize Melinda is choking on a secret, but he is definitely a believer in speaking up. At one point in the story Melinda refuses to read the class her paper on "suffragettes" who fought for women's right to vote,

own property, and have the same access to education as men. David tells her: "But you got it wrong. The suffragettes were all about speaking up, screaming for their rights. You can't speak up for your right to be silent. That's letting the bad guys win. If the suffragettes did that, women wouldn't be able to vote yet" (73).

Latham writes, "Melinda's ultimate growth, I would argue, is not toward any sort of 'integrated' self but rather toward an acceptance of the performative nature and inherent fluidity of identity" (375). And yet at the same time Anderson's book is preoccupied with what Melinda hides from others, no matter how long Anderson is willing to wait to have her speak. It is a book that consistently incites Melinda to speak out, suggesting ultimately that speaking to adults is ultimately in her best interest.

While everyone struggles to form his own identity, this struggle encounters additional obstacles in search of a feminist identity. Women face a constant struggle to express themselves and form their identities, in spite of the violence they face in life, including rape, domestic violence or the breaking of their spirits. Feminist identity is a woman's collective or social identity that involves adopting feminist attitudes and identifying as a feminist (Eisele & Stake, 2008). It is similar to Erikson's (1959) self-image's definition of identity, as it requires a strong sense of self and acceptance of, in this case, her gender. Woman's relationship script supports the traditional role of women as relationship caretakers, socializing them to put their partners' needs before their own and making it difficult for women to express their personal preferences. Women are also

at risk of becoming victims of relationship violence. Although the side effects of sexual, physical, and psychological violence against women are similar to those experienced by men, women have reported a higher number of psychological effects (Clements, Ogle, & Sabourin, 2005). Upon leaving their abusive relationships, women remain at risk for violence. Psychological (emotional) violence is also associated with negative health effects in college students, including depression, chronic health problems, anxiety, and substance and alcohol abuse among community samples.

Melinda is under extreme pressure. She is living a nightmare. Her rapist is a guy at her school, and he's stalking her best friend. Teen years are usually a time of constant change, of bodies, interests, and understanding the world. The rape

forces change on Melinda through violence. It changes her physically and mentally, setting off a string of transformations – some of which probably wouldn't have happened if she hadn't been raped. Melinda's main motivation reveals the secret and it says a lot about her character. When she sees that Rachel, the friend who betrayed her before, is in danger of becoming Andy's next victim, she is compelled to speak. This shows us that Melinda is loyal to their past history, and that she cares about the safety of others. Depression is the unspoken theme that defines Melinda's behavior for much of the novel. While she does exhibit some obvious external signs, such as cutting her wrist with a paperclip, much of Melinda's depression is internal and is not fully understood by anyone, including herself. Her behavior issues stem from her

depression and her lack of desire to actively engage in her life. Because of Melinda's strong internal voice, it is clear that she is not a naturally weak person. On the contrary, she is witty and smart, astutely observing those around her. Thus *Speak* can be seen not as the story of a girl growing stronger, but of an already strong girl overcoming depression. It is a story of a girl who finds her voice.

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