

Speak Concept Analysis

Literary Text: *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson

Organizational Patterns

This novel is divided into four main sections divided by grading periods at the narrator's school. Within each of these four main sections there are smaller chapters ranging from less than a page to four pages. The title of each of these chapters is related closely to the content within and is formatted in all caps. These chapters break down Melinda's days in classes, at school, and at home. Each of the larger sections ends with Melinda's grades for the grading period, both for school and social aspects (e.g. lunch, clothes, and attitude). It is important to notice these grades, whether they go up or down, and what has happened in these sections that may have had an impact on Melinda's grades. There are no grades for the fourth marking period, when Melinda has reached a very important point in her healing process.

We can assume by the organizational pattern that the events in the novel occur chronologically. Special attention should be paid to the parts of the novel that occur before Melinda reveals what happened to cause her current state-what triggers her bad feelings.

Related Issues

Theme: There are several themes in this book which are all interrelated. It is first and foremost a book about rape and its consequences. Melinda crashes a summer party by calling the police and runs and hides when they get there. She called the police because she had been raped by a boy named Andy Evans (whom she refers to as "IT" for a large portion of the novel). After busting the party, Melinda spends the rest of the summer and her first year in high school alone because her friends will not talk to her. She rarely speaks, and her grades suffer along with her social life.



Clearly, Melinda faces severe depression as a consequence of rape. She does not tell anyone what really happened at the party because that would require her to speak of something she is trying to erase. In trying to deal with these things alone, she loses motivation in school and has no goals anymore. She says she used to be like her friend Heather: "happy, driven, aerobically fit" (24). Now she has no desire to do her homework or make friends or join a club. She goes to school because she has to,

and she spends time alone in a closet at school trying to create a safe space for herself.

The theme of being a social outcast is an important part of this novel. It's one of the very first things the narrator tells us: "I am Outcast" (4). This theme could lead to important discussions about making judgments or assumptions about people and befriending or understanding others. Melinda is an outcast for busting a party, but even her best friend would not ask why Melinda did it. Melinda is an outcast because of the assumptions and lack of understanding of others.

Setting: In the larger scheme of things, the story takes place in central New York, Syracuse area. Students should probably be aware of the weather tendencies in this area, since much of Melinda's development or lack thereof coincides with the progression of the weather.



Most of the novel's events (and most of Melinda's narration) occur while



Melinda is at school-Merryweather High School. Obviously students know a thing or two about high school at this point, so they can use this knowledge to decide whether Melinda's story is an accurate representation or not. Mostly students need to understand how potentially lonely and threatening this environment can be so that they understand Melinda's social position.

Other significant settings include Melinda's closet within the school and at home, the art room, Heather's house, and Melinda's house. These smaller scenes are places where Melinda either feels comfortable or uncomfortable and where she faces much growth. As she describes them, the students will be able to understand why.

Point of View, Narrative Voice: Melinda Sordino, a ninth grade girl at Merryweather High, tells the story. The novel is all in the first person, present form. The reader's point of view is limited to her perspective, but it is hard to view this as a disadvantage as Melinda presents an objective view as an outsider of the social environment at her high school.



Literary Terms

Symbol: There are several profound symbols that parallel Melinda's growth throughout the novel. In her art class, she must find some way to depict a tree as a representation of herself and her feelings. She struggles to create a tree full of life; she struggles to create a tree that is damaged. She goes through various steps in her process to create a good and representative tree. At the end of the novel, her father wants to trim the sick and dead part of the tree in their front yard. This is a symbolic representation of Melinda's recognition that she needs to trim off the bad part of herself so she can flourish like the tree.



Also profound is the symbol of the closet. Melinda spends a lot of time in the closet at her school as well as her closet at home. It is a safe and small space which no one invades. At the end, she is confronted with her rapist invading her safe space, and it is there where she gains the strength to say something and defend herself. She speaks.

A less obvious symbol is that of seeds and growth Melinda learns about in her biology class. She unearths struggling plants in her front yard, and she asks her dad for seeds to plant. She must start small and brave through the surface.

Imagery: This novel is full of powerful and beautiful imagery. The most significant and repeated motif is animal imagery. Melinda first brings it up in the initial assembly scene where she compares herself to a wounded zebra. There are several other times where she compares herself to a rabbit trying to escape a predator, most often Andy Evans. She essentially uses animal imagery to paint herself as either prey or as the outsider (128).

Voice: Possibly one of the most noticeable aspects of this novel is Melinda's powerful and authentic voice. She offers an isolated perspective which evokes sympathy and understanding, but she also has a darkly entertaining voice. Since she does not speak to anyone else, the reader gets to hear her innermost voice, and this makes for an extraordinarily genuine and relatable novel.

Affective Issues Related to the Work

There are a few ways in which students can relate to this work. They will either feel like Melinda in her exclusion, or recognize that they participate in doing the excluding of certain people. I think all of them can relate on some level to Melinda's loneliness sense of not belonging. Even those who are part of particular groups can feel like they don't belong, that awkwardness of adolescence. If so many feel this way, why are we not more understanding and accepting of others?



Melinda has a severe case of depression as a result of what has happened to her. This will influence discussion in a direction toward what depression is and whether it is "real." There may be a discussion on what to do to stop it or minimize it as well.

Several students, especially in their tough stage of adolescence, will be able to connect to her sadness and lack of motivation.

Students can relate to the more academic aspects as well—having strange teachers and learning things they do not care about or connect with. School hours are the worst of most students' days. If the males can't relate to Melinda's emotions, they can at least connect to her feelings toward school. All students can also connect to the popular idea of partying and parties getting busted by the police as well. What is it about school that students dislike so much?

Some may relate to specific characters depending on the social group with which they identify. However, besides The Marthas, none of these are explained in enough depth for students to relate. Some may relate to Melinda and others to Heather the motivated, outgoing friend. Some may relate to the confident and athletic Nicole. Some might relate to the artistic Ivy. Whoever they connect to, evaluating them in their relation to Melinda is where it should all tie together. What makes someone a good person and a good friend?



Issues of popularity, isolation, loneliness, partying, judgment, rape, and friendship are just some of those that can be discussed.

Vocabulary Issues

The vocabulary in this novel is not very complex; the Raygor Reading Strategy marks *Speak* at a sixth-grade level of reading. Certainly the content is not

appropriate for such a young grade. Melinda is intelligent but understandable at an adolescent level. The limited slang Melinda uses is mostly at the beginning when she names the various social groups. As a class, we could make guesses as a class about what the people in these groups would be like. One slang word I came across was PDA (public display of affection), and I think that word has dropped out of adolescent usage, so that could be clarified.



To give specific examples of good usage in this novel would be difficult, since Anderson has captured the teenage voice and thought so well in the novel's entirety. The most noticeable examples of her adolescent usage occur in her interactions with adults, or in her thoughts about them. In a conversation with her parents and the principal, she says, "Fat chance" about their ability to listen or believe her (114). In contrasting the student view with the school authority view, Melinda describes how the Principal "stormed in yesterday, smelling pleasure" (78). While these are not instances of complex vocabulary, the narrator uses creative words to portray a certain (adolescent) mood and outlook.

In the creation of her own vocabulary, Melinda often capitalizes words. She capitalizes all of the social groups. She has a name for her teacher: "Hairwoman." She calls Mr. Freeman's room "Cool Central" (77). These vocabulary words are self-explanatory but original.

I highlighted other words throughout the novel that may not be clear, such as "factions," "indoctrination," "PR," "Eurocentric Patriarchs," "vespiary," "wistful," etc. There is a unit plan available online wherein a teacher makes note of other possible vocabulary words at

<http://www.sheboyganfalls.k12.wi.us/cyberenglish9/Speak/speak.htm#Vocabulary:>>.

Background Knowledge

In the back of the novel there is an interview with the author. She says that many young men have enjoyed this book but have asked her why Melinda is so upset about being raped. Some girls may not even understand why this can be such a traumatic even for a young woman. We must scaffold this novel with the facts about and significance of rape. It is difficult to know when to do this as the students probably will not want to know why Melinda is acting this way until it is revealed in the novel. In any case, the novel will seem like nothing but a dramatic, crazy girl's rambling.



It is also necessary to have a thorough understanding of depression and its signs to fully comprehend this novel. Hopefully students will be able to recognize these things either in themselves or in people they know and seek help or learn lessons from Melinda's way of dealing with her pain. The self vs. self idea is a repeating theme in this work and must be understood through the lens of depression.

Implications for Students of Diversity

In terms of race, ethnicity, or culture, this book does not offer a whole lot of information or perspective. This book does touch on individual and familial diversity in the high school setting. Melinda and her friend Heather come from different familial backgrounds. Some students might be able to connect to either of these girls, and many may not.



All of the social groups (e.g. the Jocks, the Cheerleaders, the Marthas, the Suffering Artists, the Thespians) are mentioned briefly and do not offer an opportunity for students to connect with any of them. However, there is the idea that Melinda is a middle class white girl, and her perspective on things may raise opportunities for discussion since she does not call attention to skin color. Perhaps students of other cultures and backgrounds have a different way of seeing people and groups in high school than Melinda.

Rachel Bruin is a middle class white girl seeking her identity in high school which is an opportunity for all types of diverse students to connect. She tries to find a place with foreign exchange students by going back to her ancestral roots and learning another language. She is trying to define herself like she never has done before, according to Melinda. Students of diversity are probably trying to connect to both Americans while staying connected to their heritage. Rachel's search for identity may provide an opportunity for these students to connect.

Gender Issues

This is a big cause for concern in this novel. It is written from a female perspective who is also a rape victim; this suggests women are weak sexual objects. On the same note, the stereotype of the overly sexual male predator is reinforced. It is important to remember that Melinda overcomes this challenge and ends up on strong at the end. Melinda's good friend David Petrakis is a nice, social, respectful, helpful boy. So the stereotypes aren't completely and totally upheld.

The coach and history teacher is male, the English teacher is a female, and the art teacher is male. This reinforces stereotypes regarding subjects which genders are good at or which they can teach.

Obviously, I must approach this subject with openness and sensitivity. There should be open question and answer times regarding how students of each gender feel regarding how they are being represented in the story. Males should be able to come to an understanding of the female perspective and vice versa.

Central Question or Enduring Issue

Are we listening?

It is important to recognize Melinda's silence throughout the novel. It is also important to recognize that no one ever asks her what is wrong or is open to listen when they do ask. Melinda's parents, teachers, school officials, and friends all are not listening to her silence. Those closest to her do not even attempt to understand. Even worse, those around her make judgments about her because she called the police rather than asking her why she did it. She does not speak because no one asks, and no one wants to listen. This is an important issue to discuss because individuals all suffer from isolation and depression, but the suffering increases when they have no friends to rely on and when others are cruel. Hopefully this question will inspire students to be more understanding and less likely to jump to conclusions about others. Anderson is incredibly successful at asking this question simply by writing the thoughts and actions of Melinda and the lack of action taken by those around her.



What can we do to stop these things from happening?

I think the author is shoving this problem into the faces of the readers. She suggests that we as a society cannot pretend that these situations (rape) and consequences (depression) do not exist. How can we be aware and safe from these situations? Anderson is successful in presenting the problem, but I wonder if it may have been more effective had Melinda's case been even more dramatic (e.g. a suicide as a result of depression). In any case, the issue exists throughout the novel because Melinda never feels safe, and we as a class can discuss how to create this safety.

How far will we go for acceptance?

Throughout the novel, we are presented with characters like Heather and Rachel who go to silly extremes to fit in. Melinda's outside perspective makes Anderson

very successful at criticizing these social processes. We know Melinda to be a very witty and intelligent girl who has been hurt; she remains loyal to the one friend she has and will not try very hard to be accepted. We know Heather and Rachel to be young girls attempting to be something or someone which they are not; they are disloyal and dishonest to themselves. This is an important question to bring up with teens as they develop themselves while trying to be accepted at the same time.

Research Issues/Project Ideas

1. Rape
 - a. Write a two-page double-spaced essay and prepare a five minute presentation regarding rape. It should include statistics and other information as well as provide tips as to how to stay safe from these situations.
2. Substance Abuse
 - a. Write a two-page double-spaced essay and prepare a five minute presentation regarding alcohol abuse. This paper should discuss the dangers of such abuse including its legal consequences and possibly information regarding adolescent drinking rates.
3. Depression
 - a. Write a two-page double-spaced essay and prepare a five minute presentation regarding depression. It should include information about depression's causes, symptoms, and cures.
 - b. Alternatively, write a poem in a first-person perspective which accurately portrays the thoughts and feelings of a person suffering from depression. Use at least two references from the text.
4. Self-reflection
 - a. Create some sort of artistic piece (painting, collage, sculpture, etc.) which you feel represents you. Remember that Melinda must use the object of a tree to portray her feelings. You may focus your attention on some sort of object, but you do not have to.
5. Journal
 - a. Write in a journal for a week (a page a day) following the style and form of Melinda's thoughts. They do not have to be sad or depressing like hers, but these entries should reflect some understanding of scattered and random thought processes as well as genuine thoughts and feelings.



6. Comparison/Contrast Essay

- a. Write a comparison/contrast essay between *Speak* and some other classic (non-young adult) novel in which you compare some aspect of theme, character, plot, setting, or other. Note that Melinda often makes references to Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. You may want to use this novel.

Information/Functional Texts



Interviews. Students may read direct interviews with the author to gain a better sense of why she wrote the novel and how. There is an interview at the back of the novel as well as online. The resource is cited below.

Anderson, Laurie Halse. "Speaking Out." The Alan Review 27.3 (2000): 35 pars. 28 Oct 2005

<<http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/spring00/anderson.html>>.

Interview on Teen Reads:

<<http://www.teenreads.com/authors/au-anderson-laurie.asp>>.

Rape. Students may find information online about rape or sexual violence at several websites including this one: <<http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/factsheets/svfacts.htm>>

Depression. Students may find it useful to understand depression and its effects in order to take the novel seriously. Information is available at <<http://www.teendepression.org/>>.

Syracuse. It may interest students to find out more about the setting (Syracuse, NY). Information is available online at <<http://www.syracuse.ny.us/>>.

Author Website. This site contains information both from teachers and the author herself about the novel. It even makes note of paying attention to characters' last names. Allowing students to browse around the site may give them the ability to enjoy finding out unique information on their own.

<http://writerlady.com/novelsh/s_guide.html>