

Critical Analysis of *Speak*

Speak, by Laurie Halse Anderson, is a book about the trials and tribulations of high school life. The main character, Melinda, has a particularly hard time fitting in because of an incident that took place over the summer (Anderson, 1999). Her old friends will not speak to her, and no other “clans,” as Melinda calls them, will accept her (Anderson, 1999). In her school, the “clans” mean everything (Anderson, 1999). They dictate who to talk to, what to wear, and basically how to exist (Anderson, 1999). Without a clan to belong to, a person is essentially an outcast to be tormented by those lucky enough to fit in somewhere. The thesis of *Speak* seems to be that life in general is unfairly segregated and unkind to outsiders, especially those who cannot fit in because of things they cannot change.

Looking at the cultural competency models, Melinda’s high school would fall under the “Cultural Incapacity” model. The description of this model, “a system or agency that does not intentionally seek to be culturally destructive, but rather lacks the capacity to help minority clients and communities,” is a fair analysis of the high school (notes provided). There are clans on top of clans, these being what most people call “cliques,” and the school is powerless to break them up. Even if there was a ban on cliquish behavior, that would not stop people from falling into groups that keep the unwanted out. Schools want to be places of learning, not social grounds, but they are incapable of keeping cliques out, and they are often clueless about how to help those left on the outside. No one can force someone to accept another, so those in the minority must flounder around and do the best they can for themselves. While the school clearly showed signs of wanting to help Melinda through parent meetings, school counselor meetings, and the like, they still had no clue about her situation (Anderson, 1999). The counselor even falsely assumed that she was part of the “Marthas” clique just because she had been seen near them a few times (Anderson, 1999). Although the school system did not mean to be a torment to Melinda, it completely “lack(ed) the capacity to help.”

This writer personally found *Speak* enjoyable, if not a little heartbreaking at times. Cliques are an everyday part of life, but to see someone subjected to such meanness on an everyday basis for no

reason was difficult. Even more difficult was discovering the reason why Melinda was treated as a minority and an outcast at her school. While most of the students angrily believed that she had “messed up” their summer party because of calling the police about alcohol being present, she actually called to report her own rape (Anderson, 1999). She was so full of fear about getting in trouble for being at the party in the first place and terrified over what had just been done to her that she left the scene (Anderson, 1999). Thus, no one knew the true reason she called, because she was unable to speak about it to anyone.

I found this portrayal of high school very believable. The book stated that most of the characters were around Melinda’s age, all just ready to go to high school. I think that there is a particular strain on kids of that age. Society seems to want to make young adults grow up so fast, and that results in them having to deal with things that people much older and much more in control of their emotions should be dealing with. Melinda mentions her thoughts right before her rape, when the Senior guy who did it was kissing her, that she is going to be able to start high school with a boyfriend (Anderson, 1999). People her age used to just be getting over the impulse to play with dolls, and here she is, making plans for a steady boyfriend. Then, after all the trauma she experienced, she was left to navigate high school alone. *Speak* is painful but true, as that is exactly what would happen to a person who was thought to be a “rat.”

Melinda had been part of a clan called the “Plain Janes,” but because one member had moved away and the others had split off into new clans, she was left alone to be a “wounded zebra,” as she put it (Anderson, 1999). For a time she kept company with another “wounded zebra,” Heather, who was new to the school and did not have a place to belong, either (Anderson, 1999). However, Heather was determined to find a clan, and she eventually settled on the “Marthas” (Anderson, 1999). These girls were the “do-gooders” of the school, but they were mean under the surface (Anderson, 1999). They basically made Heather their slave, and she was glad to be one (Anderson, 1999). That meant she was no longer an outcast, and she had an identity, sad as it was. Because the “Marthas” did not approve of

Melinda, Heather ended up leaving her behind as well (Anderson, 1999). She stated that it was because Melinda was depressed and withdrawn, and generally not any fun (Anderson, 1999). Melinda was an outcast again. Not even the outer rim of school society would accept her.

To avoid the torture of everyday life, Melinda found two safe havens: the Art room, and an empty janitor closet (Anderson, 1999). Anyone who has gone to school knows that janitors are usually thought to be on the lowest rung of school society, because who would want to spend time with the people who cleaned the bathrooms and carried out the garbage? The janitors of Melinda's school had been given a new space, so she took their old one (Anderson, 1999). It was disgusting, dirty, smelly, and covered with roaches, but Melinda found it better than having to deal with school (Anderson, 1999). Coincidentally, she put a poster of Maya Angelou in the space to make it more cheerful. The book does not mention if she knows or not, but Maya Angelou also experienced a brutal rape at a young age. In a way, she is part of Melinda's identity. She was an outcast because of the intolerance for her race, just as Melinda is an outcast because of the intolerance of her fellow students.

In the Art room, Melinda has an assignment for the year, and it is to draw a tree (Anderson, 1999). It sounds easy, but the teacher demands that everyone's assignment be able to "breathe life" by the end of the year (Anderson, 1999). Understandably, this is a difficult assignment for Melinda, since she is barely living herself. She is an outcast in this class, too, but at least here she is able to concentrate on something other than the wreck her life is in. Her turning point comes when she ventures from the assignment in order to make a sculpture with turkey bones from her ruined Thanksgiving dinner (Anderson, 1999). The teacher applauds her efforts, and a former friend even takes time to show her appreciation for what Melinda has created (Anderson, 1999). However, the teacher notices how the sculpture, with its turkey bone body and Barbie doll head, speaks to him about pain (Anderson, 1999). With someone finally catching on, Melinda retreats into herself a little more, and goes back to the tree.

The tree is a real problem for Melinda. She simply does not know how to breathe life into

something when she feels dead inside. The stages of the tree are indicative of the way that she feels inside. At first she draws nothing but dead trees, and then she moves on to trying to carve a tree out of a linoleum block (Anderson, 1999). Either way the tree is hard and cold, and not living. Perhaps the reason she is so caught up in using the linoleum blocks is because they are cold and hard, just the way that she feels. It is a necessity to be cold and hard when one is an outsider. That way, nothing can harm you, or at least it looks like nothing harms you.

Melinda is failing almost all of her classes due to not trying and not being able to concentrate (Anderson, 1999). In her social studies class, she finally finds something that she can take an interest in, and that is the women's suffrage movement (Anderson, 1999). For extra credit, she compiles an extensive paper on the subject, only to be told by her difficult teacher that she must read it aloud in order to get the credit (Anderson, 1999). Instead of reading it, she stages a small protest of her own. She writes on the board that she is exercising her right not to speak (Anderson, 1999). Of course, this gets her in trouble and gets her a "D" grade on an otherwise excellent report (Anderson, 1999). As another student later points out, Melinda has somewhat missed the point with her protest (Anderson, 1999). She hardly ever speaks, and the whole point of the suffrage movement was to get the right for women, a silent minority, to speak their minds in government and in their own lives. Still, Melinda is unconvinced. Although she longs to speak out, she simply is not able. She is like women who have no rights to this day, silent and sad.

What brings Melinda to speak is rather amazing, considering all that she had been through. Her rapist begins to date her ex-best friend, and she finds it impossible to sit by and let that happen (Anderson, 1999). With this in mind, she finally relates what happened to her to the former friend by way of a note (Anderson, 1999). Of course, she is not believed, but now that she finally said something, she begins to take in life, just like the tree she is creating is supposed to be doing. She leaves a note on a bathroom stall, decrying her rapist, and returns later to find that many girls have added to her warning to stay away from him (Anderson, 1999). When she speaks her mind, she is not

alone after all. She is part of a group that hates what a man does to women. She is no longer a minority. Melinda begins to branch out like the tree. She gains a couple of friends, and finds that she no longer needs her old janitor's closet to hide in (Anderson, 1999). When she goes to remove her things, the unthinkable happens. Her rapist follows her and traps her in the room. As he attempts to rape her again, she draws strength from all she has learned during the year. She finally understands that to not be an outsider, you must find your own voice. She imagines the women she has studied cheering her own, and she is able to finally say no (Anderson, 1999). An altercation occurs between Melinda and her rapist, and it draws attention to the room (Anderson, 1999). To her amazement, the whole women's lacrosse team comes to her rescue, including a friend that had turned away from her (Anderson, 1999). In that instant, everyone finds out the truth about what happened to her and why she has been so silent, and a wall breaks down inside of her. She can be silent no more, and she is no longer an outcast. She is the girl who called her rapist on what he did, and to some that makes her a hero.

Speak covers the ground from being part of something to being an individual, and back again. In the end, Melinda borrows from the plight of everyone who has ever been left out due to race, color, or gender, and she gains her voice from the strength they have shown. She finally has a clan that is better than all the school's clans put together. She is a survivor, and she has gained a voice with which to speak.

Works Cited

Anderson, Laurie H. 1999. *Speak*, Puffin Books, New York.