

# **Catalyst Study Guide**

**Catalyst by Laurie Halse Anderson**

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# Contents

<a href="#">Catalyst Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Part 1, Chapter 1, Elemental.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Part 1, Chapter 2, Delayed Reaction.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Part 2, Chapter 3, Galvanize.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Part 2, Chapter 4, Oxidizing Agent.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Part 2, Chapter 5, Alchemy.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Part 2, Chapter 6, Electrostatic Forces.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Part 2, Chapter 7, Nuclear Stability.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">Part 3, Chapter 8, Photoelectrons.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Part 3, Chapter 9, Radioactive.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Part 3, Chapter 10, Phase Transition.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Part 3, Chapter 11, Alpha Decay.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Part 3, Chapter 12, Activated Complex.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">Part 3, Chapter 13, Critical Pressure.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">18</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">21</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">23</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">25</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">26</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">27</a>



## Plot Summary

The novel *Catalyst* by Laurie Halse Anderson is a tale of teenage growth and coming of age. The protagonist and narrator of the novel, Kate Malone, is an eighteen year-old senior at Merryweather High School. She loves math, science, running track, and is fiercely loyal to her family. Her father, Jack, is a reverend; her brother, Toby, is fourteen. Kate cares for them, doing their laundry and making sure they take their medicine and eat well. Kate's mother has been dead for nine years, having died of sudden pneumonia.

Kate reveals to the reader that there are two sides to her: a good side (the Reverend's daughter, obedient, scholarly, athletic) and a bad side (where in her mind she is rebellious, and in person allows her boyfriend to put his hands all over her). Kate dreams of getting into MIT. Down the hill behind the Malone house and church lives Kate's mortal enemy, Teri Litch. Teri tortured Kate throughout elementary school, and has since been rude and abrasive to Kate.

A fire breaks out in the Litch family barn, destroying it, and damaging part of the Litch house. Mrs. Litch, Teri's mother, moves in with Betty, a member of the church, while Reverend Jack organizes a volunteer effort to rebuild the house. Teri, meanwhile, and her little brother Mikey will be staying with the Malones. To complicate things, Kate is rejected from MIT, and realizes she is in trouble because she has only applied to one college.

During the rebuilding of the Litch house, Mikey accidentally electrocutes and kills himself. It is then revealed that Mikey is actually Teri's son, not her brother. Teri resolves to destroy the interior of the house in rage and in depression. At the end of the book, Kate decides to take a year off before college and help Teri rebuild the house.



# Part 1, Chapter 1, Elemental

## Part 1, Chapter 1, Elemental Summary

Kate Malone says she has two sides. One side is the side everyone sees: a good girl, the daughter of Reverend Jack Malone, a science and math geek, and who has great things ahead of her. But then there is the dark side to Kate that no one sees where she is overconfident, lets her boyfriend touch her all over, and is rebellious. She runs at night so no one can see her run.

She considers herself something of a robot: helping with chores, especially laundry. She reflects on how good Kate finds helping around the house soothing, while bad Kate questions what her brother and father will do when she leaves for college. Her brother, Toby, is 14 and doesn't help much at all. They have a cat named Sophia, and a black Lab named Mr. Spock. Kate is set to leave for MIT in four months.

Kate also reveals that her mother has been dead for nine years, and her father has never remarried. Kate has only submitted one college application at all, to any college. It worries her. Some of her friends, like Sara, have been accepted on early decision to Bryn Mawr.

## Part 1, Chapter 1, Elemental Analysis

The first chapter of the novel is an exposition into the life of Kate Malone, who immediately tells the reader that there are two sides to her. She is thus presented as, early on, a complex emotional character. Yet, her self-centeredness and her arrogance shine through above all vis-a-vis her desire to get into MIT, and her obsession with her future regardless of anything else (as an example, Kate wonders what her brother and father will do when she is no longer around to wash their clothes for them).

Her help around the house is presented through Kate's conception of herself as having a good and bad side. The good side genuinely seeks to help; the bad side is annoyed at having to help. Yet, Kate's explanation of this focuses around herself: she is the ultimate end in that she relates everything she does to herself. Even her good side, genuinely wanting to help, isn't interested in selflessness (helping for the sake of helping), but rather self-aggrandizement.



# Part 1, Chapter 2, Delayed Reaction

## Part 1, Chapter 2, Delayed Reaction Summary

Kate wakes up for school an hour late. She reveals herself to be an atheist as she scrambles about to get ready for school. This includes getting all of Toby's asthma medications arranged on the counter. As she does so, her father asks her to sit down and talk with him. He questions Kate about college. Kate explains to him that she is waiting on a letter from MIT before she makes any decisions, yet doesn't tell her father she has only applied to MIT. When she leaves, he says "God bless" to her.

Kate rushes to school in her car which she has nicknamed "Bert". She wonders why her father talks about God to her, because she doesn't force science on him. She also reflects on her mother, who contracted pneumonia and died from it. Kate arrives at Merryweather High School and heads to Ms. Cumming's AP Chemistry class after running into a security guard and being escorted to the office. Ms. Cummings is also Kate's mentor.

Most of Kate's friends have been accepted into different schools, and Kate is unnerved that she still hasn't heard anything yet. There are bets going around in class about who gets into what college, and the odds are against Kate, four to one. At lunch, Kate sees Teri Litch, her mortal enemy who tormented Kate through elementary school. Unlike Kate, Teri doesn't seem to care much for education. Kate sits down to eat with Sara Emery, Travis Baird, and Mitchell A. Pangborn III - Kate's boyfriend. Mitch will be attending Harvard. Kate notices at this point that members of the football team are following Teri around the cafeteria, quietly chanting "Bitch". Teri leaves, then returns with a book, and hits one of the football players in the mouth with it. She then punches another player, and a fight breaks out. Teri's watch breaks and flies across the floor. Others join in. Security pulls them apart. In class, Kate sees her father arrive at school through the window, and later leave.

After school, Kate heads to a cross-country scrimmage between Merryweather and Springfield. Kate thinks of the day's events, and gets lost on the course in the rain and hail. When she gets home, her house, beside the church, is full of people getting ready for a church dinner. Kate heads to the basement of the church to help hand out food with some of the ladies, and leaves her watch to the side. Teri takes the watch, and afterward, Kate heads to her house which is behind the cemetery behind Kate's house to get the watch back. There, Ms. Cummings brings Teri's mother food from the church dinner, and Teri introduces Kate to her frail, blind mother, and her two year-old brother, Mikey. Kate's father arrives to talk to Teri's mother as Ms. Cummings leaves.



## Part 1, Chapter 2, Delayed Reaction Analysis

Kate's self-centeredness is again apparent when she essentially dismisses her father's desire to talk about things like college. She completely ignores him in her mind, so self-confident is she in her ability to get into MIT. She won't even take into consideration her father's genuine concern for her future. It is also revealed in this chapter that Kate has a nemesis, and that nemesis's name is Teri Litch. Unlike Kate, who seems to be a complex character, Kate presents Teri as relatively straightforward: an unkind, vindictive, abrasive bully. Teri's abrasiveness is on clear display when she goes after the entire football team.

The antagonism between Teri and Kate is further expounded upon when Teri takes Kate's watch from the church basement. Kate's insistence upon its return brings her into the Litch home, where she discovers that Teri's house is not a tranquil paradise. Teri's mother is blind, and Teri's little brother, Mikey, is only two. The presentation by Kate of Teri as a simple, cut-and-dried character, is beginning to fray.



## Part 2, Chapter 3, Galvanize

### Part 2, Chapter 3, Galvanize Summary

Kate's father arrives at school with a letter from MIT admissions. Kate opens the letter to discover her application has been rejected. Kate cries, and she and her father embrace, and her father consoles her by telling her she has other options. He then has to leave to head to the guidance office because of Teri's fight the previous day.

Kate believes she is a failure. She has applied to no safety schools, and the realization is tearing her up. She attempts to go to the guidance counseling office, but the office is packed with kids with college questions, so Kate heads out. The track team is in the weight room for conditioning, and Coach Reid allows Kate to run on the treadmill. She almost passes out.

That night, the Litches' barn catches fire. Teri and Mikey will be spending the week with Kate and Toby. Mrs. Litch needs quiet, so she will be staying home alone. Teri and Mikey both end up sleeping in Kate's room.

### Part 2, Chapter 3, Galvanize Analysis

Kate's self-confidence shatters with her rejection from MIT. Compounding the situation is the announcement by Jack that Teri and Mikey Litch will be moving in with them for an unknown amount of time (perhaps a week). This throw's Kate's schedule and peace at home into disarray, and she is at once opposed to the idea. Kate is in pain herself, but her self-centeredness cannot even allow her to see outside herself to the pain and uncertainty that Teri experiences.

Here again, Kate's self-centeredness reigns. She is shattered by not being accepted to college, but her opposition to helping out Teri -mortal enemy though she may be- illustrates more to the point the unreality of Kate's selfishness. The Litches have nearly lost their home, and have lost their barn. All Kate can do is whine about the Litches living with them, and wonder what went wrong with MIT.



## Part 2, Chapter 4, Oxidizing Agent

### Part 2, Chapter 4, Oxidizing Agent Summary

Mikey has an accident in Kate's bed, ruining her comforter. As Teri comes to take care of Mikey, Kate notices Teri is wearing the gold necklace that Mitch gave her. Kate's father has called Kate out of work for the day, so she can stay home and help out. Kate is ready to kill her father by this point. Kate heads across the cemetery to the Litch property. Most of the house has been saved; the barn is ruined. Kate is angry at her father, but Reverend Jack has the idea that the church community will come together to rebuild the house.

Kate volunteers to bring Teri and Mikey to Betty's, a member of the church, where Mrs. Litch is recovering. Teri doesn't want to talk about her mother to Kate, explaining that her father hit her mother in the head with a baseball bat. Mrs. Litch gets confused sometimes because of the injury. They head to the Moon, a biker bar, for Teri to get paid, go by the pharmacy so Kate can apologize about not coming to work, and then head around so Teri can pay the family's bills. At the social services office, Teri argues about a check Mikey hasn't received yet. Later, Kate goes to the grocery store with Teri to pick up food and other needed amenities. At the food store, Kate runs into Sara, who is sad that MIT did not accept her, and believes it to be an injustice. Kate also runs into Mitch, who tells her that she needs to get her plans in order and to think realistically. Kate is vexed and checks out.

Teri is waiting in Bert, engine running, and they head out. Kate has no idea how she got Bert started, but Teri floors it. They park near a Sears, and Teri explains that she hid her food to steal it later. They both reveal they are unhappy with the living arrangements, and both agree to do whatever they can to get things back to normal.

### Part 2, Chapter 4, Oxidizing Agent Analysis

The presence of the Litches throws Kate's world into disarray as expected, from Mikey's bedtime accident to Teri talking about the kinds of food they need in the house, especially for Mikey. Kate volunteers to drive Teri and Mikey around on errands, more out of a sense of obligation than kindness. Kate, who has presented herself as a complex character, begins to appear rather flat. Teri's character, presented by Kate as straightforward, begins to appear more and more complex. Teri makes the money in the family, pays the bill, and handles dealing with social services.

Yet, despite Teri's emotional character complexity, she still retains a dark side, such as plotting to steal groceries. Both of them are unhappy with their current situation, and want to do anything they can to help get through it faster and painlessly.





## **Part 2, Chapter 5, Alchemy**

### **Part 2, Chapter 5, Alchemy Summary**

Kate prays in church -to everyone she can think of- to find a way to get into MIT. She also wonders about how she'll make it through the week, deal with Teri, figure out why Mitch is beginning to annoy her, and get on with her life.

### **Part 2, Chapter 5, Alchemy Analysis**

Kate's lack of dimensions are painfully apparent as she prays in church -not to God, but to any god or any supernatural being out there- to help her get into MIT. This is contrasted with her father, who encourages church members to rally together to help out the Litches.



## Part 2, Chapter 6, Electrostatic Forces

### Part 2, Chapter 6, Electrostatic Forces Summary

Teri skips school to work on the house with the volunteers; Kate brings Mikey to preschool, which is also at Merryweather High. Kate doesn't speak to Mitch in chemistry. At home, Teri gives Mikey and Kate a tour of the progress on the house. Teri approaches everything with real authority, explaining framing and load-bearing beams and how the flow of the house should be. Kate then participates in some of the work.

Kate talks to her father that evening, who refuses to help her appeal MIT's decision because he thinks she's too focused on MIT. Kate meanwhile continues bringing Mikey to preschool, and helping out around the house. In turn, her father and brother give her more space.

### Part 2, Chapter 6, Electrostatic Forces Analysis

Kate continues to deal with having her routine disrupted, yet the beginning of her character's growth occurs. She takes over the responsibility of bringing Mikey to daycare, and enjoys teaching him scientific words and speaking to him. In this way, the condition of the Litches appeals to Kate's emotional side: the rebuilding of the house isn't just about Teri, but it is also about Mikey. Mikey is playful and friendly, and looks up to Kate. The situation that Teri is in -not having a home- also affects Mikey, who is innocent of and removed from the feud between Teri and Kate.

Reverend Jack also gives Kate a reality check, declaring that he will not help her appeal MIT's decision. Her father's attempt to get Kate to see beyond her narrow plans fails, and Kate continues on in the same way.



## **Part 2, Chapter 7, Nuclear Stability**

### **Part 2, Chapter 7, Nuclear Stability Summary**

The Litch house progress is amazing by the following Saturday. Kate and Toby help clean windows while volunteers continue work on the house. Toby questions why the Litches didn't clean anything up after Charlie Litch, father and husband, had gone to jail. Kate surmises that it was a question of energy, time, and money.

That evening, as the volunteers eat, Mikey gets through his childproof gate and electrocutes himself. He dies instantly. It turns out that Mikey is Teri's son.

### **Part 2, Chapter 7, Nuclear Stability Analysis**

Kate and Toby begin helping with the Litch house. Progress -mostly because of community and church volunteers- is astounding. Everything seems to be going according to plan. Teri herself is helping to direct construction efforts. Yet tragedy strikes when Mikey accidentally kills himself. Teri's character is given an added dimension when it is revealed that Mikey is actually her son, and not her brother.



## Part 3, Chapter 8, Photoelectrons

### Part 3, Chapter 8, Photoelectrons Summary

News media and ambulances arrive to take Mikey away. Sara, Travis, Mitch, Tobey, and Kate stay in what would have been Mikey's bedroom. They are horrified, but Mitch is angry, declaring someone is always responsible and that there should be a massive lawsuit. Mitch leaves when Kate and the others begin painting the walls with shapes and fingerprints and splatters.

Late that night, Reverend Jack and Teri return home. Kate and her father sit up in the kitchen. Mrs. Litch will continue staying with Betty; Teri will continue staying with Kate. Later, Teri heads out to her house, and Kate follows. There, Teri sits in Mikey's bedroom, and Kate sits beside her and lines up all of Mikey's toys. Kate and Teri sit back-to-back under a blanket, and hold hands.

### Part 3, Chapter 8, Photoelectrons Analysis

The death of Mikey becomes community news. The strength of friendship between Kate, her friends, and her brother, is severely tested by Mikey's death, and friendship comes through with flying colors. Kate's friends sit up with her, talking about Mikey and helping her to cope with everything that has happened. Kate's character complexity has once again begun to expand.

The expansion of Kate's character continues unchecked through the night, when Kate sits with Teri in Mikey's bedroom. A simple act of kindness -of Kate's presence and holding Teri's hand -proves to be essential for Teri. For the first time, Kate is reaching out to Teri not out of obligation, but out of sincerity.

## **Part 3, Chapter 9, Radioactive**

### **Part 3, Chapter 9, Radioactive Summary and Analysis**

Sunday dawns gray and foggy. Kate cannot summon the energy to do anything. Ms. Cummings comes by to see how everyone is. Teri goes out drinking, and then she and Kate spend the night on the floor in Mikey's bedroom again.



## Part 3, Chapter 10, Phase Transition

### Part 3, Chapter 10, Phase Transition Summary

Teri and Kate go to school Monday at Teri's insistence. They float through the day, with Teri accompanying Kate to her classes. They both fall asleep in Chemistry. As Kate falls asleep, she believes she is scum, wonders what her life will be like, and wonders what Teri's life will be like. No one bothers Teri, because everyone knows what happened.

Mitch is not in school. Travis says he has spoken to Mitch's mother, who says Mitch doesn't want to talk. She relates to Travis that Mitch has been acting strangely, that he's been cleaning. At home, a funeral director meets with Teri. Kate calls MIT pretending to be her mother, to discover that she was rejected because she didn't have anything extra to offer MIT besides good grades and competition prizes.

Kate heads to Sara's, but Sara isn't home, so Kate heads to Mitch's. Mitch has cleaned his room, explaining he is getting older and is ready to move on to other things. Mitch and Kate cuddle up, and Kate confesses she has no safety schools to which she's applied.

### Part 3, Chapter 10, Phase Transition Analysis

Kate and Teri are inseparable on Monday, as Teri follows Kate around to all of her classes. Teri is nothing like her former self; indeed, the life has been drained out of her with the death of her son. Kate is still searching for answers about MIT, and gets them: essentially, there is nothing special about Kate that makes her stand out. All of the pretentious, self-aggrandizing confidence Kate has had, is now gone. Much like Mikey's literal death has impacted Teri beyond comprehension, Kate has metaphorically died with the understanding of why she did not get accepted to MIT. Mitch has also reached a turning point in his life: he has come to understand that it is time to get things in order, and grow up. Kate is also approaching this conclusion.



## Part 3, Chapter 11, Alpha Decay

### Part 3, Chapter 11, Alpha Decay Summary

Tuesday rolls around. It is the day of Mikey's funeral. Mitch, Sarah, Travis, Ms. Cummings, and many others attend. Kate notices in the cemetery that a red cardinal lands on her mother's tombstone. She attributes it to a quest for food or for a mate, rather than as a sign from God or her mother.

As Kate and Toby clean up later that night, Toby asks about their mother's funeral since he had been too young to remember. Teri goes down to her house in Bert, and Kate follows to find Teri smashing at the renovated kitchen with a sledgehammer. Teri confesses to Kate that she dressed Mikey for the funeral. Kate tries to help Teri calm down, but Teri is bent on destruction. She gives Kate her keys, and then as Kate goes to drive away, a paint can full of red paint crashes through a window and hits the car, spilling red paint everywhere. The windshield gets a hairline fracture.

### Part 3, Chapter 11, Alpha Decay Analysis

Teri is inconsolable by the end of the week. She takes Bert to her house, and begins destroying everything that had been built the past week. Kate does her best to stop Teri, but Teri lashes out at Kate, forcing her to flee, and then throws a can of paint at Bert. Teri, who has previously only been capable of unbridled anger, is now in a state of shock and rage because of her loss. The destruction of the house's interior is symbolic of her loss: it is as if everything inside Teri has been destroyed by Mikey's death.



## **Part 3, Chapter 12, Activated Complex**

### **Part 3, Chapter 12, Activated Complex Summary**

Teri decides to move in with her mother and Betty. But soon, Reverend Jack and Kate discover Teri is living in her own house, continuing to destroy it. There is nothing Jack can do because Teri is eighteen and the house belongs to her.

Friday, Kate's father makes her stay home to rest, but Kate decides to do cleaning. She discovers that Toby is doing a biography project on their mother.

### **Part 3, Chapter 12, Activated Complex Analysis**

Teri remains living in the house, destroying it continuously. Kate's father exercises parental judgment, requiring her to stay home on Friday to get some rest. Kate, however, uses the time to do cleaning. There is less annoyance taking care of her family this time. She has been humbled in many ways. She has at last accepted that she will not go to MIT, and that she must figure something else out.





## Part 3, Chapter 13, Critical Pressure

### Part 3, Chapter 13, Critical Pressure Summary

Saturday morning, Sara and Travis bring Kate to the Salt City Diner. Mitch is waiting for them. They have breakfast. Their waitress is Teri. Teri harasses Kate, and Mitch defends Kate earnestly. Teri throws her apron over her head, goes into the back, comes to the table, gives Kate back her watch and necklace, and leaves.

Kate goes to Teri's house and finds her in Mikey's room. She apologizes on behalf of Mitch. Kate also explains that she wants to help Teri put the house back together and will take a year off before college to do so. Teri consents.

### Part 3, Chapter 13, Critical Pressure Analysis

Kate's character growth and complexity have reached their zenith by the novel's end. She once made fun of people who took a year off between high school and college. Now, she is going to do that. Yet she is not going to do it for personal motives, such as traveling through Europe. She is going to take a year off to get herself in order, and to help Teri rebuild her house. Teri, likewise, has reached the emotional zenith of her character. She is finally able to accept some modicum of friendship from Kate, agreeing to let Kate work with her on the house.



# Characters

## Kate Malone

Kate Malone is the protagonist and narrator in Laurie Anderson's novel *Catalyst*. A senior at Merryweather High School, Kate is eighteen years old, and the daughter of Reverend Jack Malone. Kate is fiercely loyal to her family, and takes care of most of the work around the house, from making sure her brother Toby takes his asthma medication, to making sure the laundry for all three of them is done.

Kate describes herself as both a good girl and a bad girl. As a good girl, the side that everybody sees, she is a reverend's daughter, obedient to her father, loyal to her family, caring, sweet, a scholar, and an athlete. The side that nobody sees is one where her boyfriend puts his hands all over her, and where she mentally rebels against her situation. She is also an atheist. Kate is basing her entire future on being accepted to MIT, and tells no one that she has not applied to any other schools.

Kate's mortal enemy is Teri Litchfield, a bully who lives down behind the Malone house, church, and cemetery. Teri's mother is old, frail, and blind. Teri's father is in prison for brutally assaulting her mother with a baseball bat. Teri's brother, Mikey, is two. When the Litch barn catches on fire, and part of the house is damaged in the fire, Teri's mother moves in with Betty, one of the church members. Teri and Mikey move in with the Malones. Kate is not happy about the decision at all.

Compounding Kate's unhappiness is that she has been rejected to MIT and believes she is a failure. During the rebuilding of the Litch house, Mikey accidentally electrocutes and kills himself. It is revealed that Mikey is actually Teri's son. Teri is beside herself with grief, and goes about her house destroying what has been rebuilt. She eventually begins living in the destroyed house, and Kate goes to her and tells Teri she will help Teri rebuild the house, taking a year off from college to do so.

## Reverend Jack Malone

Reverend Jack Malone is the father of Kate and Toby, resident reverend at the local church, and community rock. His religious duties and his beliefs as a Christian lead Jack to be a servant of the community. He is often running errands for people, bringing them medicine, and offering them counseling. Jack is a stern, yet kind father, who comforts Kate in moments of despair, and challenges her to be a better person by bringing the Litches to live with them.

Jack is also a widower. His wife died of pneumonia nine years before the events of the book. He explains earlier in the book that he has buried his heart with his wife, and has no interest in finding a new wife.



## **Toby Malone**

Toby Malone is the fourteen year-old brother of Kate, and son of Jack. Toby plays the trombone, video games, and is in all ways a typical teenage male. He looks up to his sister, his father, and misses his mother, though he is too young to remember too much of her. His biography project is about his mother.

## **Teri Litch**

Teri Litch is the eighteen year-old antagonist in Laurie Halse Anderson's novel *Catalyst*. She doesn't care much about education, works at the Moon (a lakeside biker bar) and handles all of her family's expenses. Her mother is blind and frail, and her son, Mikey, is two -though everyone believes that Mikey is her brother. Teri's father, Charlie, is in prison for having assaulted her mother with a baseball bat. Teri is extremely gifted with carpentry, construction, and mechanics.

Teri is a loner, and had bullied Kate in elementary school. Teri is now prone to fighting -even against football players- but is a kind and caring guardian to her family. She is overtly hostile to Kate repeatedly throughout the novel. When Mikey is accidentally killed by electrocution, Teri goes on a rampage, tearing apart the inside of her house being rebuilt. She gets a job as a waitress soon after, but later quits. She goes to live in her destroyed house, where Kate meets her and offers to help her rebuild.

## **Mikey Litch**

Mistaken for her little brother, Mikey Litch is actually Teri's son. He has accidents in bed, loves playing with toy trucks, cars, and vehicles, and is more intelligent than he appears. He is killed when he accidentally electrocutes himself by touching an exposed electrical outlet.

## **Mrs. Litch**

Mrs. Litch is the blind, frail, and thin mother of Teri, and grandmother of Mikey. After being savagely assaulted by her ex-husband with a baseball bat, Mrs. Litch becomes prone to bouts of forgetfulness and mental instability. She has a weak heart, and lives with Betty, a churchgoer, during the house rebuilding.

## **Amanda Cummings**

A science teacher at Merryweather High School, Amanda Cummings is Kate's teacher, mentor, and friend. Amanda Cummings helps Kate with science fair projects, and offers emotional support to Kate throughout the novel.

## **Sara**

Sara is one of Kate's best friends, who has been accepted early to Bryn Mawr. Sara is supportive, encouraging, and a dedicated friend to Kate. Sara is dating Travis.

## **Mitch**

Mitch (Mitchell Pangborn III) is Kate's boyfriend, and has been accepted to Harvard. He is slightly arrogant, and works with his family's landscaping business. Following Mikey's death, Mitch is motivated to sort his life out and prepare for the adult world. He is often at odds with Kate, and serves to be a rational, if somewhat cold, reality check. He tells her she needs to apply to other schools, and she needs to have backup plans. He also proves to be wonderful emotional support for her, cuddling with her and consoling her. He also is quick to defend Kate, especially against Teri.

## **Travis**

Travis is one of Kate's closest friends, and is Sara's boyfriend. He chauffeurs Sara around, and serves to be a dependable friend to the others.



## **Objects/Places**

### **Syracuse, New York**

Syracuse, New York, is the setting for the novel. It is the location of the Malone house, local church, and Litch barn. It is also the location of Merryweather High School.

### **Merryweather High School**

Located in Syracuse, New York, Merryweather High School is the school that Kate, Toby, Teri, Sara, Travis, and Mitch attend. Merryweather also has a daycare where Mikey spends time.

### **The Church**

The Church is the center of the community. It is where Reverend Jack works, prays, and exhorts his followers to do good.

### **The Cemetery**

The cemetery exists behind the Church, the Malone house, and the Litch farm. It is where Kate's mother is buried, and where Kate sees a red cardinal on her tombstone.

### **The Malone House**

The Malone house is the home of Reverend Jack Malone, his daughter Kate, and his son Toby. It is also the home of Sophia, the cat, and Mr. Spock, the dog. It serves as both a launching pad for church activities, and is a refuge for Teri and her brother following the barn fire.

### **Acceptance Letter**

Acceptance letters are received by Sara, Mitch, and others, detailing the approval of their applications to college. Kate does not receive such a letter.

### **Rejection Letter**

Kate receives a rejection letter from MIT, meaning that she is not accepted to attend school there.



## **Bert**

Bert is Kate's old, beat-up car which sometimes stalls out. Bert is driven around by Kate to and from school, is hotwired for use by Teri, and suffers a cracked windshield when Teri hurls a can of red paint from a window.

## **Kate's Watch**

Kate's watch is stolen by Teri after a church dinner, prompting Kate to head down to Teri's house to get it back. Teri returns the watch later in the book, only to have Kate give it back to her as a gift.

## **Toy Truck**

Mikey's favorite toy is a truck, which he often plays with. He is playing with it when he accidentally kills himself, having struck an exposed electrical outlet with the truck.

# Themes

## Personal Growth

Personal growth is the overarching and dominant theme in the novel *Catalyst* by Laurie Halse Anderson. The protagonist, Kate Malone, and the antagonist, Teri Litch, both grow and develop over the course of the novel in various ways and for various reasons.

At the beginning of the novel, eighteen year-old Kate is slightly arrogant and somewhat self-centered. Though she helps out at home out of a mix of kindness and obligation, she is focused solely on one thing: getting into MIT. Nothing else matters to such a degree that she hasn't even bothered applying to any other schools. She knows what she wants, and she will stop at nothing to get it. In so doing, she has secured amazing grades and won science competitions, and concentrates on schoolwork and track as well as maintaining her home routine of chores and laundry. Yet Kate's world is shattered by two seminal events. First, she is rejected from MIT, causing what should be her first year of college to have nothing planned instead. Second, the Litch barn catches on fire, and the ensuing drama forces Kate's nemesis, Teri Litch, to move in with the Malones. Kate whines and complains that her schedule and her routine are going to be disrupted.

Teri, likewise, is not happy. Teri begins the book as someone who is defensive and antagonistic toward others. Indeed, she takes on the football team in a brawl single-handedly, all for calling her a bitch. Teri despises having to live with the Malones, mainly because she knows Kate hates her. Teri, being the sole provider for her family (she works, pays the bills, and deals with social program providers), is utterly reluctant to accept help. She is quick to anger and believes the world is out to get her.

By the end of the book, Kate has come around to understand that there is more to the world than school. She has also come to understand that sometimes outwardly angry people, like Teri, truly do have big hearts and suffer just the same as everyone else. Teri, on the other hand, comes around to understand that there are good people in the world, and there is such a thing as charitable help. Both of the characters are, ultimately, stronger people for the places to which they have come.

## Family

Family is a secondary, yet nevertheless crucial theme in the novel *Catalyst* by Laurie Halse Anderson. Family is unfailingly important to both Kate and Teri.

Kate, in the absence of her mother (who has died of pneumonia nine years before the events of the novel), takes on the motherly duties of her household. Though Kate partially does household work, such as laundry, out of a sense of obligation, there is a genuine commitment inside her to wanting to help her family. She makes sure her brother takes his asthma medication, and makes sure her father has clean clothing to



wear. When Kate is rejected by MIT, her father, Jack, comes to her side to console her as best he can. Early on, Kate does not believe she fits in well with her family, and she even resents them to some degree. Yet, by the end of the novel, that has changed. She respects her father more, and understands her brother better.

Teri, on the other hand, fulfills a more fatherly role in her family. Her father, Charlie, is in jail for savagely attacking Teri's mother with a baseball bat, and leaving her blind and mentally challenged. Teri, in order to support her mother and her son, Mikey, takes on work at a biker bar called The Moon. She also takes care of paying bills, straightening things out with the social services agencies, as well as caring for her son and her mother at home.

## Friendship

Friendship is a secondary, though indispensable, theme in the novel *Catalyst* by Laurie Halse Anderson. Friendship appears in various ways and to various extents throughout the novel.

Kate's friendship with Sara and Travis, and Kate's relationship with Mitch, are dedicated and genuine. The four of them often do everything together, such as eating lunch at school and going to the local diner. When Kate's plans fall through with MIT, her friends are there to rally around her and offer encouragement and support. Mitch as well offers a dose of reality, telling Kate she needs to make other plans. He also offers her a source of consolation and emotional support. When Mikey dies, Kate's friends (and brother) sit up with her in what would have been Mikey's bedroom.

Teri's lack of friends is also painfully apparent throughout most of the novel. Friendship is something Teri shuns, even going so far as to continue putting off Kate when Kate tries to offer support and comfort. But Kate, through at first obligation, and later through a genuine desire to help, continues trying to be Teri's friend. In the end, it is a tense beginning to a friendship, as Teri accepts Kate's help to rebuild the inside of her house.





# Style

## Point of View

Laurie Halse Anderson tells her novel *Catalyst* from the point of view of her protagonist and narrator, Kate Malone. This is done because the novel is primarily centered on the theme of personal growth. Telling the story through the eyes of Kate Malone, the principle proponent of such personal growth, is demonstrably effective because it allows the reader to follow her growth as a person. This is especially telling in her thoughts and her judgments in various situations, all of which change over time. For example, at the beginning of the novel, Kate is wholly focused on getting into college, implying that she is somewhat self-centered. By the end of the novel, Kate no longer cares about college, but genuinely seeks to help Teri rebuild her house.

## Setting

The setting of the novel *Catalyst* by Laurie Halse Anderson is that of Syracuse, New York. It works well for the setting of the novel, because it allows the characters the freedom of a rural setting (Kate's love of running at night) and allows the characters the benefits of suburbia (such as the diner), both of which are important to the plot of the novel.

## Language and Meaning

Laurie Halse Anderson uses simple, yet poetic language to write her novel *Catalyst*. She does this primarily because the narrator (Kate) is a pre-college high school student who is adept at math and science. Though extremely rational, Kate is also prone to the gravity of her emotions, and so she is able to describe things in an almost spiritual sense that is compelling and beautiful. This is especially telling in a few places, such as when Kate remembers her mother, or reflects on the death of Mikey.

## Structure

Lauria Halse Anderson structures her novel *Catalyst* in an interesting way. The book is divided into three parts, and each part is divided into chapters. Each chapter is further subdivided into smaller parts, making up the larger chapter. The story is told chronologically, with each chapter and subsection devoted to a particular event or series of events that prove to be instrumental in Kate's growth.



## Quotes

"Toby and I are the proton and neutron of our atomic family unit. Dad is the loosely bonded electron, negatively charged, zooming around us in his own little shell."

Part I, Chapter 1, p. 11

"I am not the daughter Rev. Jack Malone wants. He is not the father I need."

Part 1, Chapter 2, p. 21

"When I was a kid, I overheard him tell somebody that he buried his heart when he buried Mom."

Part 1, Chapter 2, p. 53

"The freak show could bill me as the Amazing Lying Egghead. See her bullshit the family! See her lie straightfaced to friends! See her completely tank her life!"

Part 2, Chapter 3, p. 73

"Teri Litch in my house, in my bedroom. She'll murder me in my sleep with an ax. I'm going to hurl."

Part 2, Chapter 3. p. 89

"Your dad is making you do that. If it was up to you, I'd be on the street."

Part 2, Chapter 4, p. 121

"The lines between my days and my nights are blurring. The night is filled with the calls of owls and the smell of daffodils, and I run for miles."

Part 2, Chapter 6, p. 139

"'Accidents don't happen,' Mitch says. 'Someone is always responsible.'"

Part 3, Chapter 8, p. 160

"Once we are past them, Teri's shoulders sag as if the air has been let out of her. I can't believe she's standing, much less has the energy to walk or dare the team to fight her again. She is made of titanium."

Part 3, Chapter 10, p. 173

"Our essence is in this room, the atomic products of breaking down two girls to their elemental selves; frightened, defiant, lonely."

Part 3, Chapter 13, p. 229



## Topics for Discussion

Personal growth is a dominant theme in the novel *Catalyst* by Laurie Halse Anderson. In what ways does Kate grow as a human being? What causes this growth? What are the outcomes?

Personal growth is a dominant theme in the novel *Catalyst* by Laurie Halse Anderson. In what ways does Teri grow as a human being? What causes this growth? What are the outcomes?

Kate Malone and Teri Litch both perform parental duties in their households. What are these duties, and why do Kate and Teri perform them?

Discuss the theme of family in the novel *Catalyst* by Laurie Halse Anderson. Is family important to Kate and Teri? Why or why not? Do their thoughts on family change in the end? Why or why not?

Friendship is an important part of the plot of *Catalyst*. In what ways do Kate's friends demonstrate their friendship toward her? In what ways does Kate demonstrate friendship to Teri? Why is this important to the novel?