

# **Speak Study Guide**

**Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson**

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## Overview

Melinda Sordino suffers through her freshman year at Merryweather High School in silence. Her transition from middle school to high school is complicated by a misunderstanding which sends Shockwaves throughout her existence. Gradually, readers become aware that Melinda is spiraling out of control as she becomes mute and loses interest in herself, her family, and school. Abandoned by her friends, she yearns to confide in them. Her voice is presented through a subdued inner monologue which becomes stronger and louder as Melinda struggles to reveal the truth behind her action to call for help at a summer party. Ostracized because her classmates believe she betrayed their trust, Melinda expresses herself through an art project and gardening. She ultimately confronts her antagonist and begins to heal.

## About the Author

Laurie Halse Anderson was born on October 23, 1961, in Potsdam, New York, and grew up in Syracuse with her sister, Lisa. Her father, Reverend Frank A. Halse, Jr., is a Methodist minister, and her mother, Joyce Mason (Holcomb) Halse, had a management career. Anderson's parents penned poetry and encouraged her to apply her strong imagination to reading and writing: as a child she used to pretend she was a polar bear as she waded through deep snow in her neighborhood.

Anderson often composed stories on her father's typewriter and was excited when she learned to create haiku in second grade.

This experience inspired her to devote herself to understanding words in order to express herself artistically as a writer. She read voraciously through her school's library collection, which she considered magical. Anderson was drawn especially to poetry, history, and geographical and cultural books. Heidi and the dictionary were two of her favorite books.

Her extensive reading piqued an interest in foreign cultures. She traveled as an American Field Service exchange student to Denmark when she was a high-school senior.

Anderson's host family resided on a pig farm where she learned Danish and local and national customs. In 1981, Anderson graduated from Syracuse's Onondaga Community College with an associate's degree then moved to Washington, D.C., to study language and linguistics at Georgetown University. She married Gregory H. Anderson on June 19, 1983. One year later, she completed a bachelor's degree at Georgetown.

Her husband became the chief executive officer of Anderson Financial Systems, and the couple had two daughters, Stephanie and Meredith. Anderson is a Quaker and describes herself as politically independent.

Speak 365 Anderson moved near to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and devoted herself to her family. When her daughters were older, she began writing books to submit for publication. In 1996, Anderson published two picture books, *Ndito Runs* (illustrated by Anita van der Merwe), about a Kenyan girl exploring her community, and *Turkey Pox* (illustrated by Dorothy Donohue), featuring a girl whose family celebrated Thanksgiving differently because she had chicken pox. *Ndito Runs* was praised by the American Booksellers Association which named it "Pick of the Lists," and that title was also selected for recommended book lists by Kansas State Librarians, the Nevada Department of Education, and the Texas Literature Review Center. It was translated into Afrikaans, Lesotho, Xhosa, and Zulu. Anderson's third picture book, *No Time for Mother's Day* (1999), also illustrated by Dorothy Donohue, tells about a daughter's unique gift for her mother.



Anderson wrote *Speak* after she awoke from a nightmare in which a teenage girl was screaming and crying. Startled by her dream, she checked to make sure her own daughters were all right then wrote a rough draft of a young adult novel that night.

Having read Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (1995) and listening to her daughters' stories about high school life, Anderson was acutely aware of the crises confronting teenage girls. She realized that her narrator, Melinda, had a story she was ready to tell. Anderson had been contemplating themes that she developed in *Speak*, but she had not planned to write this novel. She twice revised her dream-inspired draft prior to submitting it.

*Speak* is Anderson's first young adult novel.

After *Speak* was published in 1999, it received starred reviews and recognition as a *New York Times* and *Publishers Weekly* bestseller, a National Book Award finalist, a Michael L. Printz Award for Excellence in YA Literature Honor Book (1999), and an American Library Association "Best Book for Young Adults." *School Library Journal* named *Speak* the Best Book of the Year, and it was selected for the Parents' Guide to Children's Media's Award for Outstanding Achievement. The *Horn Book* included *Speak* on its Honor List. The Junior Library Guild and New England Children's Booksellers Association designated *Speak* as an exceptional novel.

Anderson's first historical fiction novel, *Fever 1793* (2000), features sixteen-year-old Matilda Cook who learns about survival, autonomy, and responsibility during a yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia. *Fever* achieved critical acclaim, receiving starred reviews and named an American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults, one of The New York Public Library "100 Best Books of Fall 2000" and "Best 2001 Books for the Teenage," a 2001 Teacher's Choice by the International Reading Association, an American Bookseller Pick of Lists, and one of the Bank Street College of Education's "The Best Children's Books of 2001."

*Fever* was chosen as a selection for the Junior Library Guild and Children's Book-of-the-Month Club and won the Parent's Guide to Children's Media Award.

In 2001, Anderson published *Saudi Arabia* as a volume in the *Globe-trotters Club Series*. She also wrote books in the *Wild at Heart Series* featuring teenage veterinary volunteers published by American Girl, including *Book 1 Fight for Life* (2000), *Book 2 Homeless* (2000), *Book 3 Trickster* (2000), *Book 4 Manatee Blues* (2000), *Book 5 Say Good-Bye* (2001), *Book 6 Storm Rescue* (2001), *Book 7 Teacher's Pet* (2001), *Book 8 Trapped* (2001), and *Book 9 Fear of Falling* (2001). She received the ASPCA Henry Bergh Children's Book Award for *Fight for Life*. Anderson also contributed to Ward Kent Swallow's *The Shy Child: Helping Children Triumph Over Shyness* (2000).

366 *Speak* Anderson teaches writing workshops for children and teachers in schools. She enjoys running and bird watching near her home in Ambler, Pennsylvania. Explaining that she feels it is a privilege to write for children, Anderson expresses hope that her stories bring good to her readers. She believes that writing children's books is



the best job for her, saying that it fills her with joy. During an October 2000 speech for The New York Public Library's Book Fest, Anderson spoke about her experiences writing historical and contemporary fiction, stating, "Both types of writing frustrate me, but for different reasons. I enjoy each for its unique challenges and rewards. I consider myself very fortunate to try my hand at both." Her writing schedule involves early morning journaling, writing passages for another young adult novel and working on other projects until noon, then researching and reading in the afternoon. Anderson's literary success with *Speak* has inspired her to attain higher writing standards.



## Plot Summary

Melinda Sordino is starting high school with a terrible secret and without any friends. At an end of summer party, Melinda was raped by a senior. Dazed and drunk, she called the police but left before they arrived. Now everyone thinks she called the police to break up the party. Everyone is mad at her, including her group of good friends from middle school. Melinda has told no one, not even her parents. She carries the burden of this alone, confused and inwardly tortured. Once a happy girl, she is now depressed, withdrawn and hardly ever speaks. She doesn't pay attention to how she's dressed and she bites her lips and nails until they bleed. Her grades are terrible. Her parents think she's going through some awful phase. Only Melinda's art teacher, Mr. Freeman, recognizes a talented, creative, yet troubled girl.

In art class, everyone is given an assignment to work on for the entire year. Mr. Freeman assigns Melinda a tree. Throughout the book, her efforts to create the right tree bring strong symbolism to Melinda's own need to heal and grow.

Melinda's distress is greatly increased by the fact that the senior who raped her also goes to her high school. He enjoys leering at her and making suggestive remarks and threatening movements. To herself, she calls him IT or Andy Beast.

Of course, high school is difficult even for kids who are not troubled. Melinda uses her quirky, observant humor to deal with some situations and to nickname cliques, students and most of her teachers: Mr. Neck, Hairwoman, Principal Principal.

One new girl, Heather, adopts Melinda as her friend but soon becomes caught up with one of the most popular cliques. They encourage her to drop Melinda and she does, coming back only when she needs Melinda's artistic ability.

Melinda's lab partner, David Petrakis, slowly becomes a friend and a potential love interest, but Melinda is too wounded and vulnerable to accept his invitation to a party.

As the year progresses and Andy keeps approaching her, Melinda's mental and emotional state gets worse. Her busy parents can't understand why she rarely talks, why she's failing so many courses, cutting school and has no friends. They try tough love, which only pushes Melinda further away. Still, there are moments of tenderness with her parents and the feeling that her relationship with them was once a happy one.

When spring comes, Melinda becomes interested in planting flowers and cleaning up the neglected yard and trees around her house. The new growth stirs something in her, a bit of hope and feeling of possibility.

Heather approaches her, seeming to be a friend again, but she only wants to use Melinda's artistic talent. For once, Melinda actually says no. This simple but important act starts to awaken her own power. She begins talking a little with Ivy, one of her old friends, who's in the art class. She also writes on a bathroom stall saying that Andy





Evans should be avoided. Days later, she feels like flying after she sees all the additional negative comments about him that have been written under hers in the stall.

When Melinda finds out that her former best friend is dating Andy Evans and going to the senior prom with him, her feelings of care and protection come forward. Finally, she overcomes the terrible rejection from her friend and tells her what happened on the night of the summer party. Rachel is horrified that such a thing happened to Melinda, but when Melinda names her attacker, Rachel calls her a liar. At the prom, Rachel confronts Andy when he becomes aggressive with her and she accuses him of raping Melinda. Rachel breaks up with him in a very public way.

After school, Andy follows her and confronts her about speaking to Rachel. At first, Melinda cannot speak. He advances on her, obviously determined to rape her again. Finally, Melinda finds her voice. She screams "No!" and continues screaming. She fights him and breaks a mirror so she can hold a broken shard to his throat. That stops him just before the lacrosse team comes to the rescue.

On the last day of school, Melinda completes her tree. It's not a traditional tree. This one shows some wounds and a low dead branch, but it's also a strong tree with plenty of new, healthy growth. Mr. Freeman gives her an A+. Melinda is, at last, ready to speak.



# First Marking Period (through page 14)

## First Marking Period (through page 14) Summary

It's Melinda Sordino's first day of high school. She boards the school bus with a stomachache and a sense of fear. Her friends from middle school glare at her and she finds a seat by herself. Soon, she's the only person on the bus sitting alone. Arriving at Merryweather High, she is herded into the auditorium with the other ninth graders. As she looks around, Melinda privately gives names to all the groups of students-Jocks, Country Clubbers, Suffering Artists, Goths, Cheerleaders and so on. Melinda is all by herself, outcast.

Melinda's ex-friends-Nicole, Ivy, Rachel-are drawn to different groups. None of them is speaking to Melinda anymore. Melinda hears a bunch of kids laughing and knows they're laughing at her. She turns around to see her ex-best friend, Rachel, among them. Rachel mouths the words "I hate you." Feeling like a wounded zebra in a *National Geographic* special, Melinda desperately looks for someone to sit with but finally just takes an empty seat. A friendly, perky girl turns and introduces herself. This is Heather and it's obvious that she's new, otherwise she wouldn't speak to Melinda either.

As the classes start, Melinda gives nicknames to most of her teachers. Hairwoman is the English teacher; Mr. Neck teaches social studies.

At lunch, Melinda has to face the cafeteria. She's decided to buy lunch on her first day until she gets a feeling for what's acceptable fashion. As she maneuvers through the lunchroom with her tray, one of the basketball players bumps into her, leaving potatoes and gravy on her chest. Everyone in the cafeteria laughs and Melinda runs out. Mr. Neck catches her in the hall and questions her, but she doesn't answer. Announcing that he knew she was trouble from the start, he writes her a demerit for wandering the halls without a pass.

The art room is filled with light and a radio plays Melinda's favorite station. Mr. Freeman, the art teacher, welcomes his students to his class, saying that art is the only class that will teach them how to survive. Melinda's former friend Ivy, who's knowledgeable about art, is in this class, but doesn't speak to Melinda.

Mr. Freeman is passionate about art, equating creative expression with learning to breathe. Melinda thinks he's weird, but something in her is touched by him. He has each student pick a paper from a broken globe. The word on it is that student's assignment. Mr. Freeman wants them to work on their assignments in any medium they like and find a way to make it say something, express an emotion, to speak.



## First Marking Period (through page 14) Analysis

Anyone who's been to high school can recognize Melinda's self-consciousness on the first day of school. It's obvious, though, that something much more is happening. In middle school, she had a tight group of friends; now they seem to hate her. Melinda will barely speak, letting teachers draw their own conclusions about this withdrawn new student. The readers don't know yet why Melinda is in this situation, but she's so wounded that our hearts and our curiosity go out to her immediately. Her art teacher describes his class as the only one that will help them survive and this will prove to be very true for Melinda. Throughout the book, her efforts in art class and the encouragement of Mr. Freeman are major players in her ability to get through her first year of high school and her terrible pain.



# First Marking Period (through page 35)

## First Marking Period (through page 35) Summary

Two weeks have passed and Melinda is coping with her alienated high school life. Heather, the new girl from Ohio, sits with Melinda at lunch and calls her for long talks-with Heather doing most of the talking. She's Melinda's only friend.

At home, Melinda and her parents usually communicate with notes. Her mother and father have demanding jobs and are usually going in different directions. Sometimes, her mother prepares dinner in the morning and leaves it in the refrigerator; more often, there's a note to order pizza. Although it's September, Mom is anxiously getting her store and staff ready for Christmas. There's not much talking in this family and her parents don't seem to have noticed that Melinda is talking even less than usual. In her room, Melinda examines her reflection in the mirror. There are dark circles around her eyes and her lips have scabs since she's constantly chewing them. She takes down the mirror and hides it in the back of her closet.

Melinda wishes she could avoid gym class. Self-conscious, Melinda changes clothes in a bathroom stall. Her ex-friend Nicole is in the same gym class. Nicole is a great athlete, excelling at every sport. Melinda finds herself in the bathroom with her former best friend, Rachel. Rachel now hangs out with the foreign-exchange students and calls herself Rachelle. Melinda suppresses her anxiety and tries to make casual conversation with Rachel but is ignored. Rachel exits the bathroom giggling with one of the exchange students.

Heather has a plan for herself and Melinda. They should join five clubs, one for every day of the week. The tricky part, she points out to Melinda, will be choosing the clubs with the right people.

Melinda visits Heather's house, where Heather's mother scrutinizes her politely. Melinda doesn't mind; she thinks it's nice that Heather's mother cares about her daughter's friends. Heather hops on the treadmill and continues chattering about all the different clubs. Finally, Melinda announces that she's not interested; clubs are stupid. Undeterred, Heather chides her, explaining how important it is for ninth-graders to get involved-that's what all the popular people do. Melinda shudders.

Heather leaves the treadmill and starts to make a plan for them, drawing four boxes (one for each marking period) and writing "Goals" in each box. Melinda realizes that she used to be like Heather, happy and physically fit. Now, Melinda's goal is to go home and take a nap.

Hairwoman and Mr. Neck both are asking for Melinda's missing homework and reports. Hairwoman threatens a meeting with Melinda's parents.



In an attempt to avoid Mr. Neck at lunch, Melinda heads for the Seniors' Wing, opens a door and steps inside. It's an old janitor's closet that's clearly never used anymore and has been forgotten. The janitors now have a lounge and supply room. Within the closet, Melinda discovers a smelly but comfortable lounge chair, a desk and a built-in bookshelf amid the unused mops. There are cobwebs and dead roaches, but Melinda realizes she's found her own private place. She steals a pad of late passes from Hairwoman's desk. Suddenly she begins to feel better.

The Homecoming pep rally will be the perfect time for Melinda to clean up her closet. She brings some sponges from home and plans to sneak in a blanket and some potpourri. Just as Melinda has made it past the teacher, Heather catches her and pulls her back to the pep rally. She brings Melinda to sit with a group who work with her on the school newspaper. They're friendly enough at first, but then they hear her name, asking if she isn't the one who called the cops at Kyle Rodgers' party. Heads snap around and Melinda is met with hateful looks. She wants to say that they don't understand, but her throat tightens. Heather doesn't defend her. When the cheerleaders cartwheel into the gym, starting the rally, Melinda buries her head in her hands and screams. There is plenty of noise; no one can hear her.

In art class, Melinda has been working on her tree, using watercolors. She paints trees that have been hit by lightning, trying to make them look like they are nearly, but not completely, dead. Everyone in the class is struggling with their project and Mr. Freeman encourages them to study the masters-Kahlo, Monet, O'Keeffe, Pollock, Picasso and Dali. He launches into a tirade about the school board, which has cut his budget for supplies.

On Columbus Day, Melinda visits Heather, whose room is finished being redecorated. It's perfect-everything in place and neatly organized. Melinda thinks that the room "screams Heather." She wishes her own room would at least whisper Melinda. Heather's latest plan is to sign them both up for the musical. Privately, Melinda thinks the musical would be easy for her. She proves her acting skills every day as she finds ways to smile through her pain or ways to avoid the whispers and taunts as she walks through the halls. Melinda tells Heather that they couldn't get into the musical. Heather falls apart for a few minutes of crying but quickly pulls herself together with a new plan for breaking into a good group.

## **First Marking Period (through page 35) Analysis**

Melinda cannot stand to face herself or look at her pain. She takes down the mirror in her room at home and hides it in the back of the closet.

As for the deserted closet she finds at school, it's an outcast like her. It has no purpose, no name. After Melinda finds her safe space, her closet, within the school, she feels a little better. She can escape from feeling constantly exposed and vulnerable. When Melinda appropriates the closet and gets her own supply of late passes, she's at last done something to take control.



At the pep rally, we find out the reason that Melinda's been ostracized-she called the police during a party. We still don't know the reason. Melinda can't bring herself to speak about what happened. She has worked hard to forget it, but it continues to dominate her life, her thoughts and her every move. We know it's horrible; she uses the noise of the pep rally to muffle her own pained scream.

Heather's companionship provides another hiding place for Melinda. Heather is someone to sit with, spend time with, but she is so self-centered that she doesn't notice Melinda's distress. She simply assumes that Melinda wants the same things. Heather's constant chatter makes Melinda's silence easy.

The tree Melinda's working on in art class is a powerful symbol throughout the book. She begins working on a tree that's been hit by lightning, that's almost dead from the injury-it stands for her own traumatic experience and her feeling of being closed off, nearly dead, to the world as she knew it and to herself.



# First Marking Period (through page 46)

## First Marking Period (through page 46) Summary

Melinda's parents confront her at dinner. The interim reports have come in and her grades-except for art-are way down. She's always done much better than this. They shout at her, but Melinda doesn't respond, finally just getting up and going to her room. Her parents continue, now arguing with each other.

The next day, Melinda tries to pay attention in biology and even enjoys looking at cells through a real microscope. She arrives at algebra class with only ten minutes left, but she has her late pass to show the teacher. Melinda always excelled in math, but she hates algebra. She's not alone, though; every day someone asks why they have to learn algebra. Today, Mr. Stetman calls on Melinda for an answer and calls her to the board. He has Rachel come up to help her. This feels like a disaster to Melinda. Rachel easily solves the problem on the board as Melinda tries to disappear.

Melinda spends Halloween night in her room at home reading *Dracula*. The next morning, in Spanish class, Melinda is humiliated when a student proclaims that "Melinda *no es linda*." *Linda* means pretty in Spanish. Everyone laughs and they continue to call her Me-no-linda for the rest of the class. Melinda thinks that this is how terrorists get started.

Heather has found a clique to join-the Marthas. Heather, who is on probation with her new group, expects Melinda to come along, but this clan holds no interest for Melinda. In the Marthas, proper dress is very important-it must be coordinated and appropriate to the season-and they are constantly taking on projects. Heather has been assigned the job of decorating the faculty lounge for a Thanksgiving party and she begs for Melinda's help. The Marthas think Heather did all the work herself and they're impressed. However, they aren't happy with Heather's friend. Melinda overhears them telling Heather that "that girl" is creepy and looks like she has a disease.

Melinda sees "IT" in the hall. He's walking happily with a cheerleader. For her, IT is like a nightmare from which she can't wake up. When IT sees Melinda, he smiles and winks.

## First Marking Period (through page 46) Analysis

There's more of a glimpse of Melinda's home life here. Both her parents are busy and distracted, unable to take the time to realize their daughter's distress. Many of Melinda's fellow students find her creepy and strange and they find ways to make fun of her.

IT makes his first appearance. Even though we don't know yet what happened, Melinda's visceral reaction makes it clear that IT did something unspeakable to her.



## Second Marking Period (through page 70)

### Second Marking Period (through page 70) Summary

Melinda's parents have ordered her to stay after school every day to get extra help from her teachers. Melinda says only that she will stay after school; she neglects to mention that she'll spend that time in her closet. She works on fixing up her safe space; it feels like a fort. There are new books on the shelves and a poster of Maya Angelou covering the mirror that's screwed to the wall.

It's even harder for Melinda to talk now. Her lips are raw and her throat is always sore. She wakes each morning with her jaws clenched. She wishes she could hand over her guilt, anger and fear to someone else. Only in the closet does she feel truly safe.

The school has a Job Day and all the students have to complete a questionnaire about their dreams, plans and preferences. Melinda's test results indicate that she should go into forestry, firefighting, communications, or mortuary science. Melinda just hopes to get out of the ninth grade alive.

In social studies class, Mr. Neck launches into a tirade about immigration. His son, he feels, lost a job opportunity because of reverse discrimination. He has the class start a debate with the topic "America should have closed her borders in 1900." Melinda works on her drawing of a tree but listens to the heated debate. One brave boy suggests there might be other reasons Mr. Neck's son didn't get the job. Perhaps the person who got the job was simply better. At that, Mr. Neck ends the debate. David Petrakis stands up and explains that Mr. Neck started a debate, which means that each student has a right to express his or her opinion. The teacher can't just stop it because it's not going his way. David points out that the Constitution doesn't acknowledge different classes of citizens based on their time living in the country. He protests the racist, intolerant tone of the lesson. The furious teacher commands him to sit and shut up, but David simply picks up his books and walks out of the room.

Thanksgiving Day is chaotic at Melinda's house. Her mother insists on trying to cook a proper Thanksgiving dinner even though she's frantic about preparing her store for the next day's pre-Christmas shopping. She forgot to defrost the turkey and tries a variety of ways to cook it without defrosting. In between work at her computer and emergency calls from her staff, she works on the meal. In the end, it becomes clear the meal is ruined. Melinda and her father are relieved when her mother gives up and goes off to the store. They order pizza.

Melinda digs the bones from the ruined turkey out of the trash and takes them to art class. Mr. Freeman is thrilled with her creative decision. Using the bones, a Barbie doll head and various items from the art supplies, Melinda creates a fascinating and





dramatic piece of art. Pleased, Mr. Freeman asks for Melinda's analysis, but her throat is so dry, she can't get any words out. So, her teacher analyzes it for her, ending with the statement: "This has meaning. Pain."

In social studies class, David Petrakis is fighting back about freedom of speech. His parents are totally supportive and have hired a lawyer. David brings a tape recorder and then a video camera and Mr. Neck teaches a straight forward class.

## **Second Marking Period (through page 70) Analysis**

Since seeing IT in the hall, Melinda has been getting worse, speaking even less and hiding more frequently in her school closet. David Petrakis, who will later become her friend, has what Melinda needs so badly-parents who support and believe in him along with the confidence and ability to speak out against injustice. Melinda's creative spirit shines when she rescues the Thanksgiving turkey carcass to turn it into a work of art.



## Second Marking Period (through page 92)

### Second Marking Period (through page 92) Summary

Winter break begins and Melinda's mother leaves a note for her to put up the tree. Melinda misses her childhood when there was a feeling of magic at Christmas time. She thinks her parents would be divorced by now if it weren't for her. She tries to imagine what Heather would do to decorate for Christmas and sets about making the house more festive.

On Christmas day, Melinda and her family exchange presents. Included in the gifts from her parents are charcoal pencils and a sketch pad; they've noticed she's drawing. Tears fill Melinda's eyes and she almost tells them her terrible secret. Her parents wait, sensing that she has something to say, but Melinda feels there's a snowball in her throat. She can't speak and the moment passes.

Two days later, Melinda's parents have decided that she should work with them during her vacation. She starts out in the stockroom at her mother's store. Being at work with her mother gives Melinda some insight into the pressures her mother faces every day. At her father's insurance office, Melinda has a job stuffing envelopes. She feels angry watching how much more relaxed his work environment is than her mother's.

Back at school, the phys ed teacher discovers that Melinda is a terrific basketball player, but, because of Melinda's poor grades, she doesn't qualify for the team. Melinda doesn't want to be on the team anyway, but she likes the sensation of succeeding brilliantly at something.

In art class, Mr. Freeman has been working on his own painting-one that expresses his unhappiness with the school board. Melinda thinks it's a masterpiece and a local reporter has written an article about it. Melinda continues to struggle with her assignment: the tree. Still, she thrives in art class and thinks, "Maybe I'll be an artist if I grow up."

Heather is having a problem with the Marthas. They're not happy with the quality of her work and she's in danger of being excluded from the group. She turns to her artistic friend Melinda for help with posters for the Canned Food Drive.

Biology class brings the opportunity to dissect dead frogs. David Petrakis is excited; Melinda is vaguely disgusted. As they get ready to work on their frog, Melinda's emotions take over. The sight of the frog lying on its back as if alive and vulnerable, about to be sliced open, awakens her memories of trauma. She faints, cutting her head in the fall.



In her closet at school, Melinda has been working on Heather's posters. Heather's busy with a modeling job at the mall and asks Melinda to hang the posters. It's nice having students see her do something good and Melinda's actually enjoying it until IT creeps up behind her. "Freshmeat," he whispers. Melinda drops the poster and masking tape and runs.

Melinda's report card is terrible except for Art. At the dinner table, her parents berate her. She doesn't speak. They outline her punishment. Melinda quietly does her homework, shows it to them and goes to her room. Melinda opens a paper clip and scratches it across her wrist-not cutting deeply but drawing blood. She scratches line after line until the pain stops.

Her mother sees the injured wrist at breakfast. All she says is that she doesn't have time for Melinda's drama. Melinda's parents have decided to try tough love.

In the school lunch room, the Marthas express their unhappiness with Heather. She hasn't been bringing in enough for the Food Drive and they don't like the posters. Melinda sits quietly on the other side of Heather, feeling her friend's distress. The Marthas are distracted from Heather when they notice Andy Evans nearby. They giggle with excitement, talking about how gorgeous and rich he is. Melinda freezes inside. Andy Evans is the dreaded IT. One of the girls calls him over to the table. Flirting with one of the Marthas, he stands behind Melinda, twirling her ponytail in his fingers. Melinda runs from the table and vomits in the girl's bathroom.

Mr. Freeman is in trouble with the school board. They've drastically cut his art budget and he's been reprimanded for giving out too many A grades on the last report cards. He seems depressed in class and has stopped working on his canvas.

Melinda has started a new linoleum block. As she works once again on her tree, the chisel slips and slices her thumb. After Mr. Freeman treats and bandages the injury, he takes the chisel and slices his canvas.

## **Second Marking Period (through page 92) Analysis**

On Christmas Day there are glimpses of the concern and care Melinda's parents have for her. Just a little more tenderness from them might bring the words from Melinda that she so desperately needs to share with them. Although we still haven't been told exactly what happened to Melinda, we can probably guess after her experience with the frog in biology. The dead frog, laid out like a victim, waiting to be cut apart, overwhelms her.

IT becomes more aggressive with her. Sneaking up behind to whisper "Freshmeat" in her ear, toying with her in the cafeteria. We find out IT's real name: Andy Evans.

Melinda is falling into deeper despair and trouble. Her grades are worse, her ability to speak is lessening. She seems to be self-destructing. Still, her superficial cuts on her wrists actually show a glimmer of hope-she doesn't want to die; she wants to survive. She's faintly asking for help.



# Third Marking Period (through page 117)

## Third Marking Period (through page 117) Summary

It's cold and Melinda, snug in her bed, oversleeps. She's missed the bus and will have to walk to school. It's not a long walk and she doesn't feel any need to hurry. She decides to stop at the town bakery but sees Andy Evans (IT) coming out of the bakery. He sees her, grins and walks toward her. Feeling like a scared rabbit, she bolts and runs from him. "Why didn't I run like this before when I was a one-piece talking girl?" she wonders.

Safe from IT, Melinda decides to cut school altogether and, in spite of the cold and snow, wanders down Main Street before catching the bus to the mall.

In English class the next day, Hairwoman introduces *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne and explains the use of symbols in the book. Melinda thinks she and Hester, the book's main character, would have been friends. She wonders if Hester tried to say no. In art class, Mr. Freeman has a new canvas, although it's still blank. He's finding creative ways to compromise with the school board. Melinda gives up on the linoleum block carving for her tree and tries finger paint. She studies books with different representations of trees.

Heather has a serious talk with Melinda. The Marthas have made it clear that this friendship tarnishes Heather's reputation. And Heather agrees, explaining to Melinda that they have nothing in common. Melinda, who was ambivalent about the friendship, suddenly realizes how much it means to her to have this one friend. Heather has made up her mind and leaves Melinda behind to go sit with the Marthas. Melinda's lab partner, David, is friendly toward her; they sometimes exchange notes in classes. She wonders if he could be someone who would "like the inside girl I think I am." Melinda is cutting school more often. One day she wanders around the wards in the hospital, thinking of curling up on one of the beds to sleep.

Principal Principal calls Melinda and her parents in for a meeting. They have noticed her frequent absences and the fact that she doesn't talk. The guidance counselor has been asked to join the meeting. They want Melinda to speak, but, of course, she is silent. Her mother is furious. Principal Principal wonders what's happened with Melinda's grades. Last year she was a straight B student with few absences and no behavior problems. The guidance counselor wants to discuss family dynamics. Melinda's father points out that, last year, she was a sweet, loving girl. He blames the change on the high school. The adults agree on a list of restrictions and consequences. The next time Melinda misses school, she's sent to detention. Also in detention is Andy Evans, who slips up and blows in her ear.



## Third Marking Period (through page 117) Analysis

Rejected by her only friend and harassed by IT, Melinda's fragile façade begins to crumble. There seems to be hope when the principal and guidance counselor meet with her and her parents. A formerly good student is failing; she rarely speaks. Is something wrong? Unfortunately, there is more frustration for the reader as the adults in the room argue and blame one another instead of looking for Melinda's true problem. Her friendship with David Petrakis is slowly growing, proving to be one of the few positive relationships she has.



## Third Marking Period (through page 137)

### Third Marking Period (through page 137) Summary

Melinda is having more trouble functioning. Even in art class, she can't do anything. Mr. Freeman says that her imagination is paralyzed and presents her with a huge book on Picasso. "Picasso," he says, "Who saw the truth. Who painted the truth, molded it, ripped from the earth with two angry hands." Melinda opens the book. When she moves into the chapters of the artist's Cubist work, something in her shifts dramatically, excitedly. She's inspired at last and draws a Cubist tree for Mr. Freeman, who beams his approval.

One day after school, Mr. Freeman gives Melinda a ride to meet her mother. On the way, he compliments her progress in art class. Melinda finds herself talking easily to him. As they part company, Mr. Freeman tells Melinda he thinks she's a good kid with a lot to say. He'd like to hear it. Melinda is actually excited about the plant study in biology class. She considers starting to talk to her parents but wonders what will happen if she says the wrong thing.

After school one day, Melinda takes refuge in her special closet for a little nap. She wakes up at 8:45 to the sound of cheering. It's the last basketball game of the season and they've won. Going out into the gym, Melinda feels happy and swept up in the celebration. David Petrakis spots her and comes over to talk. He invites her back to his house for pizza with his friends. Part of her is thrilled, but part of her is frightened by the idea of a party. She heads home.

Her conflict over David's party has stirred memories of that end of summer party. At home, Melinda remembers how Rachel, then one of her best friends, tricked her mother and arranged for them to go to the party—a party with beer and seniors. Melinda tried her first beer, then another, then one more. Feeling strange, she walked outside into the warm night. A handsome senior came up behind her and asked her to dance there in the leaves. He held her close and began to caress her in ways that her drunken mind realized were rude. When he kissed her, for just a moment, she thought he was her new boyfriend. His kisses and his touches became more aggressive. As he forced her to the ground, his hand covered her mouth as she tried to cry "No!" Melinda remembers how much it hurt. Then he got up, zipped his jeans, smiled and walked away. Back in the party house, in a daze, all Melinda could think was that she needed help and that she should call 911. Someone grabbed the phone. Everyone knew Melinda had called the cops. Someone slapped her. She walked home without a word.

### Third Marking Period (through page 137) Analysis

Mr. Freeman knows how to express pain and anger through art. He even sliced his own canvas in frustration, but he soon had a new canvas to begin something fresh. He can

see that Melinda needs to find that expression and he wants to help her find her artistic "voice."

In biology, studying the germination of seeds, Melinda is inspired by the way a tiny seed beneath the earth makes a plant that can come up and out to find the light. Here and in her art class, Melinda is working with, contemplating growing things-things that must overcome hardship to flourish. There's the sense that Melinda realizes she too must find a way to overcome her dormancy and grow.

The invitation to a party from David Petrakis sends Melinda into a vivid memory of the end of summer party. At last we know without a doubt what happened to Melinda as she lets herself recall the rape by Andy Evans.



# Fourth Marking Period (through page 162)

## Fourth Marking Period (through page 162) Summary

It's April. Melinda has passed many of her tests. She notices that Andy Beast, as she now calls IT, has abandoned the Marthas and is hanging around the International Club girls. That includes Melinda's former friend Rachel.

The last day of Spring Break, Melinda visits the mall and sees Ivy, who's working on a sketch to help with her project for art class. Ivy invites Melinda to take a look and the two former friends begin an easy, comfortable conversation about their projects.

Andy Beast went to the movies with Rachel and some of her exchange student friends from the International Club. Now, the girls walk through the halls with him and gaze at him adoringly. Even though Rachel has rejected her, Melinda can't help feeling worried about her with Andy. Something in her wants Rachel to be hurt, but, when she sees Rachel kissing Andy after school, the memories of their past friendship come flooding back. She writes Rachel an anonymous note: "Andy Evans will use you. He's not what he pretends to be. I heard he attacked a ninth-grader. Be very, very careful."

Melinda's work on a tree for art class has been progressing, but Mr. Freeman tells her that her work now is stiff and unnatural. Melinda agrees, but she's hurt by his criticism. She tosses her linoleum block in the garbage. Mr. Freeman retrieves it and brings it to her with a box of Kleenex. He explains that she can do better. It looks like an average tree. She needs to breathe life into it. His gentle voice and faith in her give Melinda courage.

In social studies class, Mr. Neck announces that anyone who's flunking can write an extra-credit report on Cultural Influence at the Turn of the Century. Melinda does not want to repeat this class. She pours her energy into a perfect report on the suffragettes. With pride, she turns it in, only to have Mr. Neck say that, to receive credit, she'll have to deliver the report orally tomorrow. Melinda is speechless.

She confides in David Petrakis, who helps her devise a plan. The next day, before class, Melinda writes a message on the board and covers it with a suffragette poster. Class starts, Melinda comes to the front of the room and Mr. Neck nods for her to start. She rips the poster from the blackboard, revealing the message beneath. It says that, in the spirit of the suffragettes, she stands up for what she believes. No one should be forced to give speeches; she chooses to stay silent. David stands beside her and says that Melinda has made copies of her report so everyone can read it. He passes them out. Mr. Neck gives her a D and marches her to the principal's office and detention.





Later, David points out to her that-although he thinks her protest was cool-she wasn't true to the memory of the suffragettes. They spoke up for their rights. If you're just silent, David says, the bad guys win. Melinda's friendship with David is deepening and he wants to call her. She likes him and likes the attention, but she's afraid that he might try to touch her.

Melinda stays after school to work on her tree sketches. The art room is one place where she feels safe. Then Andy walks in, looking for Rachel. He sits on Melinda's table. She can't speak. Just in time, Rachel walks in to claim him and Ivy comes in behind her. Melinda is still stunned,, but after Rachel and Andy leave, she manages to hear Ivy telling her that Andy is nothing but trouble.

As soon as Melinda gets home, she goes into her clothes closet, stuffs fabric into her mouth and screams until there is no sound left.

## **Fourth Marking Period (through page 162) Analysis**

Mr. Freeman seems to be talking about Melinda herself as he works with her on her tree: "Breathe life into it. Make it bend-trees are flexible, so they don't snap. Scar it, give it a twisted branch-perfect trees don't exist. Nothing is perfect. Flaws are interesting."

A real friendship begins to bloom between Melinda and Ivy-a beginning of healing. Caring about her former friend Rachel, despite Rachel's betrayal, helps Melinda start to speak-even though her first expression is in an anonymous note, she is finally telling her truth.

Melinda also finds the courage to stand up for herself when she's treated unjustly by Mr. Neck. Still, she's doing it without actually speaking (David has to speak for her), but it's a good change nonetheless.



# Fourth Marking Period (through page 198)

## Fourth Marking Period (through page 198) Summary

Melinda takes a mental health day, playing sick to stay home from school. Her mother is gentle and nurturing before going off to work. Alone in the house, Melinda curls up on the couch to watch TV. Viewing one talk show after another, she begins to reflect on her life and wonders, "Was I raped?" She imagines Oprah and Sally Jesse Raphael saying that she can't keep it inside anymore, that she has to speak up.

Back at school, in art class, Ivy accidentally catches Melinda's shirt with a handful of uncapped colored markers. Melinda goes off to the bathroom to clean up and Mr. Freeman sends Ivy in to check on her. As Ivy helps her clean the shirt, the two girls start talking. Melinda reads some of the graffiti in the stalls. She notices that someone writes a message, then others write comments. Finally, Melinda asks why Ivy said Andy Evans was big trouble. Rumor has it, Ivy explains, that Andy only wants one thing and he'll do whatever necessary to get it. They wonder what to do about Rachel, but Rachel isn't speaking to either one of them. Melinda takes one of the markers and writes "Guys to Stay Away From: Andy Evans." Ivy smiles.

The Senior Prom is approaching. In spite of Melinda's anonymous note, Rachel is still seeing Andy and is going to the prom with him.

Heather appears on Melinda's front porch, begging for help. The Marthas are taking advantage of her, demanding more and more. Heather's grades have fallen because she's so busy with them. She needs Melinda's help to decorate the Holiday Inn ballroom for the prom. Melinda says no.

That simple no emboldens Melinda. She decides to talk to Rachel and sits next to her in study hall. Melinda starts with some small talk. Both girls are nervous. Finally, Melinda asks about Andy. Rachel smiles and talks about how wonderful he is. The librarian tells them to keep quiet, so they start writing notes. Melinda asks if her former friend is still mad at her. Rachel says no, the party was a long time ago. Finally, Melinda writes that she called the police that night because someone raped her. Rachel is horrified and wants to know why she didn't tell her then. Melinda explains that she wasn't able to tell anyone, even her parents. Rachel asks who did it. Melinda writes his name: Andy Evans. Rachel leaps up, calls Melinda a liar and leaves.

After school, Ivy finds Melinda. She has something to show her. Ivy leads her to the bathroom where she wrote Andy's name. The stall is filled with more comments about how horrible he is. Melinda feels like she could fly.



The next day is Saturday. Melinda and her father watch as an arborist works on the tree in their front yard, cutting off diseased and dead branches. He's saving the tree, her father explains. Melinda goes off on her bike and finally rests near a barn. She wonders if there's a way she can take an ax to her own memories and fears so that the healthy part of her can come to the surface.

Melinda goes home and spends the afternoon cleaning the yard. Late that night, she takes a bike ride past Rachel's house, wondering if she is safely home from the prom.

On Monday morning, prom stories abound. But the most important one is that Rachel ditched Andy in the middle of the prom. They fought during a slow dance when Andy's hands and mouth were all over her. Andy's furious. Rachel burned everything he'd given her and left the ashes in front of his locker.

Melinda doesn't feel like hiding in her special closet at school anymore. After school, she goes to start clearing it out. As she leaves the little room, something slams into her, knocking her back into the closet. The door shuts. Melinda is alone with Andy Evans. Rachel accused him of raping Melinda. He denies it, accusing Melinda of jealousy. She tries to get around him and he locks the door. She can't speak. He grabs her wrists. She opens her mouth, but nothing comes out. "I know what you want," Andy says. Melinda struggles, but he holds her down. Suddenly, the sound explodes from her—a long, loud no. She fights him, but he grows more violent. Melinda screams and screams. She breaks the mirror on the wall, grabs a triangle of glass and holds it to Andy's neck. He stops, frozen. Melinda says, "I said no."

There is pounding on the door. Melinda unlocks it and the whole lacrosse team is there, wielding their sticks. One of them runs for help.

On the last day of school, Melinda stays late to get her tree right. She's no longer trying to make it a perfect tree. It's not symmetrical and the bark is rough. A lower branch is sick, but the new growth is strong and healthy. It's not perfect and Melinda knows now that this makes it good.

Some seniors come in to say goodbye to Mr. Freeman. One girl praises Melinda for her bravery and says she hopes Melinda is all right. Everyone knows what happened. Rachel has asked Melinda to call her.

Mr. Freeman comes over to see the completed picture. He gives her an A+. She's crying and he hands her a box of tissues and says that he knows she's been through a lot. Melinda offers to tell him about it.

## **Fourth Marking Period (through page 198) Analysis**

As Melinda nestles in front of the TV, it's clear that she doesn't even fully understand that she was truly raped. She's beginning to realize how urgent it is to speak up and speak out. Her writing about Andy Evans on the bathroom stall is part of this, but she's



still just writing-and staying anonymous-instead of speaking. Melinda sees that others have had bad experiences with Andy; she's not alone.

Heather's rejection of Melinda and now her friendliness when she has a reason to use Melinda are abusive-not like rape but, still, another kind of abuse. It is this realization that enables Melinda to actually speak her first "No." She is getting stronger.

And she is brave. It takes a lot of courage to approach Rachel. In finally telling Rachel what happened, Melinda sees that her old friend might have actually supported her if she'd spoken up at the time. Although Rachel is initially furious with Melinda for naming Andy, who's now officially Rachel's boyfriend, Melinda has actually saved Rachel. When Andy becomes aggressive at the prom, Rachel understands at last.

In the horrifying confrontation by Andy, Melinda at last finds her true voice and her true power. She is free. Her creativity flows and it's soon clear that she is growing and healing. Her A+ tree for Art Class expresses her, once wounded but now becoming strong and healthy, basking in the light.



# Characters

## Melinda Sordino

Melinda is starting high school—a difficult enough challenge—but it's even harder for her. She was raped at a summer's end party, called the police but left before the police arrived. No one knows what happened to her. Once Melinda was light and happy with a group of best friends. Now she's become withdrawn, frightened, depressed. She no longer takes care of herself and her clothing. She chews her lips so much that they are constantly covered with scabs. She bites her nails until they bleed. She barely talks to anyone. Her old friends, not knowing what happened, think she called the cops just to cause trouble for the party. They have all turned away from her. Once a good student, Melinda is now failing or almost failing every class except Art. She's a creative person and her art teacher realizes that and encourages her. Melinda is also a survivor. In spite of her post-traumatic stress, she tries to find ways to make her life tolerable. Her sharp sense of humor occasionally gets through. And, finally, when the school year has almost ended she is able to find her own strong voice.

## David Petrakis

Melinda's lab partner. He's so brilliant he makes some of the teachers nervous. He's also the perfect student—never late or absent, helping with computer problems, getting great grades. David speaks up when the social studies teacher treats the class unjustly and he's one of the few people to make friendly overtures to Melinda, even inviting her to a party. David has totally supportive parents, the kind Melinda wishes she had.

## Heather

The new student from Ohio. Melinda was the only person who spoke with her the first day. Cute and perky, Heather wants desperately to belong. She has grandiose plans for joining different groups and wants to drag Melinda along with her. At first, she seems to be the only person who will look past the cloud hanging over Melinda, but Heather is quick to drop her when the Marthas, the group she most wants to join, tell her to.

## Mr. Freeman

Melinda's art teacher is not given a nickname. He is warm and welcoming, enthusiastic and inspiring. Melinda describes him as physically unattractive. He's tall and thin with a "nose like a credit card." He is constantly struggling with the school board members, who keep cutting the funds for art projects. Mr. Freeman believes in Melinda. He can see the pain and the talent, in her. He's the one truly steady, compassionate, encouraging adult in the book.



## Rachel

Rachel was Melinda's best friend, the person who arranged for them to go to the fateful party at summer's end. Now, Rachel calls herself Rachelle and spends her time with the exchange students. She desperately wants to smoke but has asthma, so she has turned candy cigarettes into a cool fad. She begins to date Andy Evans (IT).

## Ivy

Creative and knowledgeable about art, Ivy was one of Melinda's close friends. They're in art class together and share passion for their creative projects. Ivy is the first of her old friends to befriend Melinda again.

## Nicole

Cute and athletic, Nicole is another of Melinda's ex-friends. Nicole is confident and relaxed in her own skin—something foreign to Melinda. Even the boys admire Nicole's ability in all the sports she attempts. The gym teachers love her.

## Andy Evans

Sometimes Melinda calls him IT or Andy Beast. He's a handsome, popular senior and he's the boy who raped Melinda at the party. He occasionally harasses her at school. When Melinda tries to protect Rachel from him, he becomes violent.

## Melinda's Parents

Melinda's mother manages Effert's, a clothing store downtown. She's constantly busy with, worried about and distracted by work. An insurance salesman, Melinda's father seems to be as distracted by work as her mother. They usually communicate with each other and with Melinda through notes. Her parents are angry with Melinda about her poor performance in school, but neither of them considers the possibility that something is terribly wrong with her.

## Mr. Neck

The social studies teacher. Melinda is on his bad side right away. He decides she's a troublemaker and watches her closely. His hair is in a gray buzz cut and he wears a whistle around his thick neck, since he's also a coach.



## **Hairwoman**

Melinda has named her English teacher "Hairwoman" because she has uncombed, stringy hair that is black from her part to her ears and then neon orange to the ends. She has her students keep a daily journal, which she promises not to read and this helps Melinda express her feelings and thoughts. Hairwoman challenges her students to stretch themselves in analyzing the literature she assigns them.

## **Principal Principal**

The school principal often seems oblivious to what's going on around him. He's not quick-witted enough to catch on to his students' tricks. Melinda notices that he has a look on his face like Daffy Duck when Bugs is putting something over on him.

## **Ms. Keen**

Melinda's biology teacher, a kind, intelligent, overweight woman who usually wears orange polyester.

## **Mr. Stetman**

He's a nice man but, unfortunately, teaches algebra-one of Melinda's least favorite subjects. Still, he manages to touch her heart when she sees how much he cares about algebra and how he tries to make it fun and interesting for his students.

# Objects/Places

## Merryweather High School

A typical large high school, located in Syracuse, New York.

## Melinda's Closet

Melinda discovered this cozy hiding place in the school. It's an abandoned janitor's closet in the Seniors' Wing. There are built-in shelves filled with dusty textbooks along the back wall. Behind a collection of mops and brooms, there's a stained armchair and a desk. Melinda fixes it up and hangs some of her artwork and a poster of Maya Angelou. She slips into her closet for naps, to write in her journal and just to be in a safe space.

## Melinda's Room

Melinda feels that her room at home belongs to an alien. It was last decorated when she was in the fifth grade, when she, Rachel, Nicole and Ivy decided to decorate each other's rooms. Everything is pink and rose and there are bunnies everywhere. It represents a time when everything was soft and gentle and safe. It no longer expresses Melinda, but she doesn't know how to change it.

## The Art Room

Here, in Mr. Freeman's domain, Melinda feels safe. The classroom is filled with art supplies, art books, art on the wall. Mr. Freeman usually works on a painting himself while the students work on their projects. He has the radio playing while they work. Sun streams in through the window.



# Setting

Anderson set *Speak* in her hometown, Syracuse, New York. Although a specific date is not given, her popular culture references and jargon suggest that the novel's events occur in the late 1990s. Most of the action in *Speak* occurs in Melinda's mind.

Readers have more access to Melinda's thoughts and perceptions regarding her actions after she was assaulted than her family, teachers, and peers. This mental setting reveals as much as Melinda is willing to face emotionally, becoming larger as she begins to accept what happened and then cope with her anger.

School is the primary setting. We first encounter Melinda as she rides the school bus on her first day in high school. The first student picked up, she strategically sits near the front in hopes of establishing eye contact with people she considers friends but remains alone because former "lab partners or gym buddies" use their eyes to "glare" and condemn her for calling the police to a party just days before. Melinda calls attention to being ignored, stating, "As we leave the last stop, I am the only person sitting alone." Entering the auditorium for freshman orientation, Melinda is aware that students are grouped in "clans" based on superficial social stereotypes and identities such as "Jocks," "Country Clubbers," and "Cheerleaders." Unwelcome in any of these cliques, Melinda is "clanless." She declares, "I have entered high school with the wrong hair, the wrong clothes, the wrong attitude.

And I don't have anyone to sit with," just like on the bus. Her school is populated with insiders and outsiders according to who fits in and who does not, but no one is as completely erased as Melinda.

*Speak* 367 Classrooms and laboratories are unfriendly spaces in which Melinda is bored by the incompetence and personal agendas of many of her teachers. She receives a demerit trying to find her first class, foreshadowing her academic decline. Melinda realizes how school bureaucrats distance themselves from students and treat them impersonally. Angry classmates viciously confront and torment Melinda verbally with name calling and by mocking and harassing her. They also kick and push her and pull her hair.

The lunchroom is a hostile area, and Melinda avoids it. She frequently eats outside the main room in a courtyard. This space also becomes unbearable because it is where Heather ends their friendship based on her dislike of Melinda's moodiness.

Although Melinda resists by saying that friends help each other during difficult times, Heather returns to the Marthas who "swallow her whole and she never looks back at me. Not once." This coldness is worsened by the display of Valentine's Day hearts on the cafeteria wall which excludes Melinda.

The Merryweather In-School Suspension's (MISS) bright, white classroom has "uncomfortable chairs and a lamp that buzzes like an angry hive." Melinda and other



students are expected to sit still and look at the walls. When Andy Evans, the boy who raped her, shows up, Melinda describes herself as Bunny Rabbit, fearful of the predator. The MISS room intensifies Melinda's anguish by not protecting her, and Andy menacingly blows in her ear.

Melinda tries to avoid the gymnasium and its associated assemblies, pep rallies, basketball games, and demands on her skill for shooting foul shots. Other athletic spaces, particularly the tennis court, emphasize her potential strength. Melinda hides in the bathroom where she cries and overhears conversations demeaning her. Later, though, the bathroom provides her a forum to tell people the truth she has been repressing.

Melinda gains access to the teacher's lounge when she helps Heather decorate it for a Thanksgiving meeting as a probationary task for Heather's possible inclusion into the Marthas. The "small green room with dirty windows and a lingering smell of cigarettes" with a "bulletin board that hasn't been cleared off since Americans walked on the moon" disappoints Melinda and affirms her realization that faculty lack respect and authority for themselves and others.

Melinda finds solace in the art room, which she calls "Cool Central," where her teacher, Mr. Freeman, boldly paints on the walls and large canvases. He urges his students to achieve self-discovery by exploring creative ways to express themselves and their emotions. Accused of awarding too many A's, Mr. Freeman defiantly writes his students' names on a wall with notes about their progress as a compromise with the bureaucratic system. A radio constantly plays music, and students are allowed the freedom to snack while they create. Only when Melinda's attacker enters the room, does she experience fear in that space.

Mr. Freeman's blue Volvo is a safe zone which delivers Melinda from freezing conditions. Inside the vehicle, she can tentatively begin to voice her confusion and anger. Mr. Freeman tells her that art is about emotion, but that most people are dead inside. He encourages Melinda by saying he is available to listen to her and that "'You're a good kid. I think you have a lot to say. I'd like to hear it.'" She talks more to Mr. Freeman in the car than she does with anybody else.

The abandoned janitor's closet cocoons Melinda. Located in an upperclassmate section of the school "Where No Freshman Has Gone Before," Melinda discovers the closet while evading the punitive Mr. Neck.

She appropriates the space as a sanctuary— "building a fort"—and cleans it and expels spiders. Bringing in comfort items such as a blanket and books, Melinda decorates the closet with her artwork and a poster of Maya Angelou given to her by the librarian.

Melinda explains, "My closet is a good thing, a quiet place that helps me hold these thoughts inside my head where no one can hear them." Ironically, the closet becomes a trap when Andy Evans realizes Melinda is isolated from help and tries to assault her a second time.



Melinda's house both comforts and distresses, her. Her room retains childish elements such as garish roses and numerous stuffed toy rabbits that her mother insisted on when she remodeled when Melinda was younger. Melinda states, "My room belongs to aliens. It is a postcard of who I was in fifth grade" and undergoing a "demented phase." Melinda's friend Heather's bedroom contrasts with Melinda's room. Organized and neat, Heather's room, painted lilac and featuring sophisticated artwork and furniture, reflects her controlling personality and eagerness to be treated as an adult.

At home, Melinda's privacy is not assured as her parents can corner her to express their upset about her grades and attitude. She retreats to her room when she hears her parents drive up and pretends to nap. She hides her mirror in her bedroom closet which she sometimes enters to muffle her screams into old clothes. She also sits on the roof to think and escape, metaphorically attempting to rise above her problems but instead bites through her lip and bloodies snow which represents the stain of her attack. Melinda begins healing when she begins to prune shrubbery that conceals her house much like her silence cloaks her pain.

By landscaping her yard, Melinda begins to examine her feelings and shape ways to express them.

The party where Melinda was raped was held at a farmhouse on the outskirts of town. She and her friend Rachel accompany Rachel's brother Jimmy to this upperclassmate party where Melinda knows nobody. The barn holds kegs and stereo equipment which isolate Melinda and make her vulnerable as the revelers indulge in beer and form groups. A nearby wooded area provides Andy Evans cover to pursue and overwhelm Melinda as she drunkenly wanders in the moonlit woods. Although Melinda is speechless when she calls 911, the farm's location is locked in by communications technology, snaring partygoers and initiating her torturous existence.

Melinda later returns to the place underneath the tree where she was raped. She describes how this experience transforms her: "I crouch by the trunk, my fingers stroking the bark, seeking a Braille code, a clue, a message on how to come back to life after my long under-snow dormancy." Comparing herself to a seed that needs nurturing, not condemnation, Melinda says: I dig my fingers into the dirt and squeeze.

A small, clean part of me waits to warm and burst through the surface. Some quiet Melindagirl I haven't seen in months. That is the seed I will care for.

Effert's, the store where Melinda's mother is employed, controls the family's life.

Melinda's mother is focused on her work and thinks that Melinda should be interested in how the store operates. Melinda resents being expected to work there during her Christmas vacation, pinning returned shirts in the basement because she is underage and legally cannot be employed.

She is angry that she has to purchase clothes there because of her mother's employee discount. Melinda covers jean labels identifying the store with her baggy shirts, the looseness which suggests her poor body image after the assault.



Her father's insurance office is also a confining setting which enrages her because her father goofs off while she stuffs gift calendars into envelopes for clients.

Melinda cannot perform her assigned tasks quickly and competently enough to his satisfaction. She accidentally cuts her tongue and bleeds, reminding her of her rape and "All of the anger whistles out of me like I'm a popped balloon." Her father "is really pissed when he sees how many calendars I bled on" and "mentions a need for professional help," ironically indicating his lack of awareness that his daughter needs counseling much more than he needs trained workers.

Melinda wanders through the various floors of the Lady of Mercy Hospital after she falls asleep on a bus and gets off at the wrong stop. After observing people in various waiting rooms and the cafeteria, she takes a hospital gown and sleeps in a sheltered spot. Melinda realizes that other people are really sick, perhaps permanently, and that she is not. This experience helps shift her thoughts toward healing. It also shows how nobody pays attention to Melinda or her apparent physical deterioration. Medical personnel, including the absentee people who stitch her bitten lips, do not inquire about the underlying reasons for her injury.



# Social Sensitivity

Speak addresses many social concerns.

Dating violence is the main issue that concerns characters. Unfortunately, Melinda's experience is one many teenage girls suffer.

Physicians, psychologists, and social workers estimate that, on average, one out of five high school girls have been physically or sexually abused by a person they are dating. Date rape statistics increased dramatically by the beginning of the twenty-first century, and the two rates for teenage girls and adult females harmed by sexual abuse and assaults have become almost equivalent. In addition to assaults by romantic partners, many teenage girls are the victims of sexual attacks by casual acquaintances or strangers who may drug their drinks at parties or take advantage of their drunkenness. Other girls might be sexually victimized by family members or trusted adults.

Young women also endure sexual harassment from their peers, teachers, employers, authority figures, or men in their communities. Although most victims of sexual crimes are female, some males are sexually harassed and assaulted. Sexism and discrimination based on gender are also problems teenagers encounter from peers, teachers, and administrators in high school.

Body image and development of self-esteem are interrelated during adolescence.

Melinda's neglect of her hygiene and appearance represents her loss of self after being raped. Without intervention and counseling, she blames herself for Andy's attack and initiates self-defeating behaviors. Cutting, mutilation, and other forms of self-injury are social problems among many teenagers who have no outlets to express their rage and grief. Eating disorders also often hint of teenagers' depression and frustration regarding social acceptance. Experts note that preadolescent girls usually are confident, self-empowered, and creative then realize as teenagers that society will not accept females who do not conform to traditional expectations of femininity, so they alter their behavior and aspirations to fit in.

Ostracism permeates Melinda's existence.

The cliques at Merryfield are indicative of a high school society which determines where people belong based on external factors such as money, parental professions, clothing, cars, athletic prowess, and appearances.

People who cannot be conveniently assigned a label are pushed to the periphery and often experience feelings of powerlessness, outrage, and confusion. Like Melinda, they are silent, although internally their voices of protest may be loud. Some students become scapegoats because of their differences or actions, such as alerting teachers to bullying or other concerns which their peers may interpret as traitorous. Teenage culture

encourages narcissism, apathy, and dismissal of others based on trivial things, not compassion, altruism, and understanding.

Excessive drinking and partying, often involving drug use and random sexual activity with multiple partners, demonstrate teenagers' willingness to indulge in risky behaviors. Impulsiveness often results in destruction of lives and property. Conditioned by a materialistic culture, many teenagers feel entitled to have anything they want, even another person. As a result, their disrespect for others often triggers violence and hostile situations. Some teenage boys have negative attitudes towards equitable treatment and opportunities for women and minorities and do not consider members of those groups worthy of courtesy and esteem. Many people of both genders are unable to distinguish between what is appropriate behavior and what is offensive.

Speak emphasizes the need for personal empowerment to cope with an ambivalent society. Melinda's message stresses the importance of individuals being able to speak up for themselves and for others without a voice. Her story also shows how readers can effectively seek help and be friends to people who need help by listening to what they have to say.



## Literary Qualities

Melinda's first person narration empowers Speak's literary strength. The use of monologue invites readers to become emotionally involved in the story and feel empathy for Melinda. Other than Mr. Freeman and David, readers seem to be the only people who will listen to her and comprehend what she is saying. Melinda's private narration encourages her to speak boldly and provocatively without constraints or fear of being humiliated or punished. Melinda's monologue is presented in the form of short passages preceded with descriptive headers like journal entries, school newspaper bulletins, or quick phone calls. Sometimes paragraphs consist of a single sentence, symbolizing Melinda's isolation.

Anderson divides the novel into four sections, each representing a grading period of the academic year. These sections also correlate to seasons. This structural framework aids Anderson's depiction of Melinda's dramatic decline, her grades plummeting along with the temperatures, then her gradual ascent as spring brings renewal and birth. To cope with the overwhelming prospect of high school, Melinda divides time and counts down the days remaining until graduation. Like nature, Melinda transforms herself from being frozen and in hibernation to thawing for growth and revitalization. In spring, Melinda's germination studies in biology class stress that seeds are "restless" to sprout, which corresponds with Melinda's agitation as her need to speak surfaces. Her interest in planting around her house suggests that she is emerging from her self-imposed confinement.

Dialogue and the absence of dialogue delivers information. Anderson often shows how Melinda does not participate in conversations by presenting dialogue as a script.

For example, another character such as Melinda's father will be designated by the tag "Dad:", followed by dialogue, then, on a separate line, Melinda will be identified as "Me:", followed by white space to indicate that she said nothing. The lack of dialogue or antagonistic dialogue reveals how people refuse to speak with Melinda and instead speak at her to condemn her behavior and attitude. Sometimes Melinda responds in short, staccato sentences in order to participate without revealing too much.

Melinda gradually discloses clues about being raped and calling 911, heightening tension and suspense. Readers become aware that something significant happened to her beyond the simple explanation her peers believe. The full story of her attack is not revealed even to readers until near the conclusion. Through her sometimes tragic, sometimes comic monologue, Melinda alludes to her attack. Jaded by the realities of academic processes and school culture, Melinda offers insights often disguised as humor. She makes lists like "Guys to Stay Away From" and "The First Ten Lies They Tell You" which reveal her intelligence to comprehend the realities of situations and her disgust with a rigid system unsympathetic to students' needs. Regardless of how Melinda presents information, she emphasizes how surreal and absurd high school life is. The indecision about which mascot should represent the school shows how difficult it is to achieve resolution of a small problem, let alone a major issue like the one Melinda





has. The mascot dilemma also underscores the lack of unity and identity at all levels throughout Merryweather High.

Anderson uses powerful figurative language to achieve effective imagery and symbolism. Melinda says, "words fall like nails on the floor, hard, pointed." She describes April as "A warm, moldy washcloth of a month." Blood is present when Melinda cuts herself carving her art project, licking envelopes, or scratching her wrists, representing the wounding of her spirit. She causes Andy to bleed, thus making him suffer the pain and fear he inflicted on her.

Snow and cold hint at a hushed silence and quiet related to dormancy. Plant, raking, and mulch references suggest Melinda's affinity and identification with plants, when she declares, "I can grow" like trees. Flying and birds represent freedom, and an emotionally liberated Melinda states, "I feel like I can fly." The moon represents illumination as Melinda contemplates her situation, and concealment of the moon symbolizes Melinda's rape, which Anderson discretely describes with Melinda's euphemistic phrase "he hurts me" repeated three times.

Names are important to convey meaning, even if they indicate the opposite of what is intended. Merryweather is inappropriate because the high school is anything but merry. Suggesting the weather is pleasant might be Anderson's personal joke referring to the region's notoriously cold and snowy winters. Melinda devises names for her teachers based on their physical peculiarities, aware that she might be dubbed by classmates with names referring to her disheveled appearance and perceived treachery. She respects Mr. Freeman and does not assign him an unflattering nickname. Students' first names represent both typical names used in the late-twentieth century and some that suggest ethnic pride (Siobhan), desires for individuality (Blitzen), and revised spellings to be unique (Rachelle).

Heather's name might have been inspired by the duplicitous characters, all named Heather, in a macabre movie, "Heathers," about the dark side of high school culture.





# Themes

## Teenage Alienation

Most teenagers experience some degree of alienation-from parents, teachers, society-but Melinda feels it in the extreme. Almost any teen, or anyone who's lived through his or her teenage years, will recognize the self-consciousness in the cafeteria and in the halls, the difficulty being understood by parents and teachers. The change from middle school to the new world of high school can be brutal and that's certainly what it is for Melinda. She was, indeed, brutalized and now everything and everyone around her contributes to her continued pain. In reading Melinda's story, we can see opportunities to reach out that she missed. We see the way she contributes to her continued alienation. *Speak* can be a great jumping off point for discussions between teens and their parents, their teachers and their friends. Through her own alienation, Melinda offers readers a way to understand and, possibly, navigate through teenage alienation.

## Speaking Out, Speaking Up

On the night Melinda was raped, she became almost mute. Frightened, disbelieving and not knowing what to do, she was unable to say anything as she was attacked. Even when she went to call the police, she couldn't stay on the line to tell them what happened. She can't bring herself to talk to her parents, her friends, her teachers. She is barely able to talk to herself about this life-changing event. Now, she holds back expression, fighting her need to cry out by biting her lips until they're bleeding and covered with scabs. We understand why Melinda can't speak; at the same time, we can see that help would be hers if she would just let go and try to communicate. As David Petrakis tells her, not speaking out-not screaming-for your rights lets the bad guys win. Her inability to speak is also shown in her difficulty to let her unique artistic expression show itself. She wants to hide herself and, at the same time, she longs for someone to discover her. Finally, in the spring, Melinda finds the seeds of her true self. With a simple "no" to the benign Heather-who has abused Melinda in her own way-Melinda's spirit begins to come forward. When she speaks loudly, when she screams at last in her confrontation with Andy Evans, she finds tremendous power.

## Rape and Its Aftermath

The vicious crime of rape has broken Melinda's spirit and left her vulnerable, depressed, confused and alienated. Melinda goes through what so many rape victims experience-feelings of shame, wondering if she brought it on herself, anger turned inward, fear of being touched, a need to protect herself any way she can and the inability to talk about it. Melinda's rapist continues to torture her by his presence in her school, by his leering remarks and occasional touches. Andy Evans has stolen not only her virginity, but also her sense of self. Concern that her former best friend might be Andy's next victim makes

her start speaking out. At first, she uses anonymous notes, then, tentatively, talks to Rachel. Eventually, she is able to fight back at Andy, defend herself bravely and vehemently say no.



## Themes/Characters

Secrets and alienation are the dominant themes in thirteen- going on fourteen-yearold Melinda Sordino's account of her miserable freshman year in high school. Silence dominates her life. Due to a recent traumatic experience and subsequent ostracism based on uninformed perceptions, Melinda publicly is almost completely mute. When she begins school, her pain is fresh and "My throat squeezes shut, as if two hands of black fingernails are clamped on my windpipe." She lives in solitude and isolation both at school and home. Privately, she engages in a dynamic inner monologue in which she generates a constant commentary about the people and situations that she encounters, though her interactions with these characters and events are minimal and unsatisfactory.

Melinda's thoughts vocalize her observations about the hypocrisy and lies of both students and adults and reinforces her desire to be mute. Her monologue varies from being serious to sarcastic or humorous and reveals ideas and opinions that she would not dare to divulge publicly. She cynically wonders if there really is a "Permanent Record" which follows students and faculty throughout their lives, perhaps showing her unspoken worry that her rape has ruined her reputation. She laments, "Sometimes I think high school is one long hazing activity: if you are tough enough to survive this, they'll let you become an adult. I hope it's worth it." Melinda is intelligent and witty, calling school orientation "indoctrination," but is disenfranchised. No one appreciates her except for her art teacher.

Melinda hints of having previously led a normal teenage life, mall crawling, socializing at the lake and pool, and talking on the phone. In contrast, after she made a panic stricken 911 call which abruptly ended a party and was a catalyst for her peers' wrath, she walked home alone initiating her exile, showered until the hot water was depleted to purge physical remnants of the rape, then cloistered herself inside her house and watched "bad cartoons," which represents her withdrawal due to being in shock.

Melinda is blamed for bringing law enforcement to a party where most of the teenagers were illegally drinking and some were arrested. The insecure Melinda passively accepts others' cruel decision to punitively make her an outcast within her high school society while quietly guarding her secret. Perhaps she feels guilty for being drunk and somewhat responsible for the attack occurring. She loses confidence in herself and exhibits self-hatred. While her thoughts have clarity, when Melinda does talk aloud, her words are often disconnected and incoherent. She epitomizes how most of the novel's characters are inarticulate in some way. "It is easier not to say anything," Melinda explains because "Nobody really wants to hear what you have to say."

Instead of making her problems disappear, silence perpetuates hostility and exclusion. At a pep rally, a student whose brother was arrested at the party obscenely demeans Melinda. Unable to cope with this constant assault, in addition to the normal academic and social pressures of high school, Melinda ignores hygiene, not bathing and wearing



unwashed clothes. She bites her lip until it bleeds and sometimes needs stitches as if to prevent herself from speaking and saying something wrong or inappropriate.

Melinda's grades drastically drop because she cuts classes and does not complete assignments. Physical ailments plague Melinda.

She suffers a stomachache on her first day of school. By keeping her secret, her pain intensifies. Melinda reveals that, "It's getting harder to talk. My throat is always sore, my lips raw. When I wake up in the morning, my jaws are clenched so tight I have a headache." She wishes she could be wrapped in a new skin like a burn victim.

Emotionally, she is depressed because she represses her anger, and she has unseen psychological wounds and scars. Melinda views most males as "predators" and considers herself a "wounded zebra." She is listless, disorganized, and cannot concentrate. She says there are two Melindas, one who wants to participate and the other who is afraid of the world because, "You can never tell when people are lying. Assume the worst. Plan for disaster." She yearns to confide her secret but distrusts authority figures whom she fears will not believe her accusations. Melinda's world seems surreal, and she criticizes herself for her situation, saying, "Every time I try to talk to my parents or a teacher, I sputter or freeze.

What is wrong with me?"

Vulnerability and loss of innocence are significant themes. Melinda identifies with seeds which face many hazards that threaten their survival. She names the phases of her art project, the "Confused Period," "Spaz Period," and "Dead Period," which suggests how she perceives herself. Melinda carves linoleum blocks like she chips away at her insecurities. Relying on non-verbal communication, Melinda states, "I am getting better at smiling when people expect it" and "I am a good actor." Ultimately, after several months, Melinda's conscious nightmare and thoughts are so uncomfortable that she cannot avoid thinking about her rape any longer. When she confronts the truth, the resilient Melinda is able to regain her voice, stand up for herself, and express her rage. She saves herself, triumphs, and is vindicated. Melinda becomes empowered and no longer exists on the periphery. Her estrangement from life begins to end as people realize the truth. Melinda's experiences emphasize the need for the community, whether a school or town, to address and help resolve problems.

The theme of immaturity permeates the novel as evidenced by students' behavior.

A variety of adolescent girls were Melinda's friends prior to the party. When Melinda most needs supportive friends, they abandon her, and she feels betrayed. Without asking Melinda to explain why she called the police, these former friends subtly and blatantly shun her. Nobody new except Heather, not even the foreign exchange students, befriends Melinda.

When her former best friend, Rachel Bruin, begins dating the boy who raped her, Melinda is motivated to talk. Melinda values her past with Rachel "who suffered through Brownies with me, who taught me how to swim, who understood about my parents, who



didn't make fun of my bedSpeak 371 room." Melinda declares, "If there is anyone in the entire galaxy I am dying to tell what really happened, it's Rachel." Rachel removes herself from her immediate past by renaming herself Rachelle to express her European heritage. She spends most of her time with the exchange students, learning to curse in foreign languages. Melinda not only cannot understand these students, she also cannot communicate with them just as she is unable to talk with Rachel. Melinda went to the party with Rachel and her older brother Jimmy, who both are furious with Melinda. When she sees Rachelle kissing Andy, Melinda says, "I can only see thirdgrade Rachel" who "braided pink embroidery thread into my hair that I wore for months until my mom made me cut it out."

Melinda finally speaks with Rachelle, but is forced to write notes when the librarian shushes them. While Rachelle is empathetic when Melinda confides her rape, she becomes angered when Melinda accuses Andy.

Later, in contrast to Melinda, and perhaps empowered by her information, Rachelle is able to powerfully express herself to stop Andy's plans to victimize her.

Melinda's two other former friends are more approachable and help her when she most needs them. Ivy, who is artistic, praises Melinda's bone sculpture with an abrupt "Good job, Mel." Scared of clowns because of a traumatic experience, Ivy refers to therapy, suggesting that she might be attuned to Melinda's need for counseling. They talk about Andy, and Ivy hints that she knows he has done some bad things. Ivy encourages Melinda's graffiti expression and urges her to look at the responses. Melinda calls Nicole, an athletic girl, a "Warrior Princess" who is friendly to everyone but Melinda and is adored by teachers and teammates.

She admits "Nicole is just not a [b——]. It would be so much easier to hate her if she were." Nicole and the lacrosse team rescue Melinda from Andy and spread the word about the attack.

Heather is an energetic new student "packing at least five grand worth of orthodontia" who has transferred from an Ohio school. She is eager to make friends and does not realize that Melinda has become a social pariah. Heather is shallow, a conformist, and easily swayed. She is pushy, trying to manipulate Melinda to do things such as redecorating her room. Melinda does not like Heather but tolerates her because she is lonely and "I need a new friend." "Just a pseudo-friend, disposable friend. Friend as accessory. Just so I don't feel and look stupid." Heather shares personality traits with Melinda's mother. Heather schemes about which clubs and service activities she can participate in and sets goals for each grading period. Melinda reveals to readers that "I used to be like Heather."

Using her voice to please others, Heather rejects Melinda in order to be accepted by the Marthas. She never truly hears what Melinda is trying to tell her. While Melinda's physical appearance deteriorates, Heather conforms her wardrobe to meet public approval. She denies herself food and exercises to become a size one to retain her role as a model at the mall. Ultimately, though, Heather's efforts are in vain when the



Marthas exclude her from their circle. Heather notices Melinda's depression and says she needs to seek treatment but does not act supportive, withdrawing her friendship and returning Melinda's friendship necklace.

Melinda's lab partner, David Petrakis, does not overtly shun her, and most of her at-school conversations are with him. He seems to function in another sphere of high school that does not care about social status. A "Cyber-genius" who "is so brilliant he makes the teachers nervous," David fixes the computer bugs in report card files for the school and sets up databases to chart the most effective ways to attain high college board scores. He also asserts himself by leaving the social studies classroom when the teacher refuses to permit students to continue a debate about immigration when the teacher does not agree with their comments. As David leaves the room, he stops to look at the American flag. Melinda comments that "He says a million things without saying a word" and "I have never heard a more eloquent silence." When David audio and video tapes class, and has his parents hire a lawyer to ensure free speech is allowed, Melinda declares that "David Petrakis is my hero." She hopes that he is interested romantically in her, and scenes such as his asking her to a pizza party at his house might foreshadow a future relationship beyond friendship.

The novel's villain is Andy Evans, who is alternately known as IT or the Beast in Melinda's thoughts. He is a popular senior athlete who raped Melinda. Andy is narcissistic, often flaunts authority, disregards rules, and feels entitled to whatever he wants. Melinda's use of a pronoun instead of his name symbolizes her need to strip him of an identity. The Beast refers to his predatory nature. As Melinda becomes psychologically stronger, she is able to write and say Andy's name to warn other girls and alert people of his crime. Andy takes advantage of the four-year difference in his and Melinda's ages, as freshmen girls often revere male upper classmates. Not comprehending that his assault was morally and legally wrong, Andy is ever present and threatens and taunts her in detention and the hallways.

Andy exemplifies the themes of deception and false appearances. Watching Rachelle and Andy kiss, Melinda says, "His lips move poison." She remembers how, when she first saw him at the party, she thought he was as handsome as a "Greek God."

Dancing in the moonlight with him, she naively thought his kiss meant that "I would start high school with a boyfriend, older and stronger and ready to watch out for me."

Angered that she has warned people about him, Andy attempts to attack Melinda violently again. She successfully fights and defends herself with a broken piece of mirror and screams, "No!" Pushing the mirror against his throat, Melinda draws a drop of blood and controls herself and stops before serious injury can be inflicted. Andy becomes Melinda because "His lips are paralyzed. He cannot speak." After Andy's crime is exposed, he becomes a social pariah.

Ignoring Melinda's lengthy quiet period, he tries to belittle Melinda by saying she has a "big mouth" and that she lied about the rape because she had been willing.



Nobody believes him.

Melinda has mixed reactions to other students. She notes the party was held at Kyle Rodgers's house but never elaborates about him. Melinda comments on the power male students have over females because they are athletes or hold other influential roles. For example, Todd Ryder is the yearbook photographer and students appease him to ensure inclusion of decent pictures and not unflattering candid shots. Melinda labels other students by physical characteristics such as calling Brendan Keller "Basketball Pole." She lumps cheerleaders into the group "Girls Who Have It All," lamenting their acceptance as role models. Comparing herself to them, Melinda speculates, "I bet none of them ever stutter or screw up or feel like their brains are dissolving into marshmallow fluff. They all have beautiful lips, carefully outlined in red and polished to a shine." Melinda assigns descriptive words to students such as "Brave Kid," who challenges Mr. Neck by saying his son might not have been hired because he was unqualified or not a good worker. She overhears "errant student" outwit the principal about loitering in the hallways.

Mr. and Mrs. Jack Sordino seem clueless that their daughter is undergoing a personal crisis. They are disengaged from Melinda's life, as well as from each other, and do not seem capable of comprehending that their daughter may possibly be at risk of suffering an emotional breakdown. The Sordinos are not nurturing or protective of Melinda. Her childhood fantasy that her real parents were royalty who would rescue her in a limousine reveals her lifelong dissatisfaction and feelings that she does not belong. Often her conversations with her parents are punctuated by silent pauses in which she does not answer their questions or respond to statements. Her parents' primary form of communication is via notes left on the counter. Melinda describes a typical conversation as a three-character dramatic performance in which her father does an "Arnold Schwarzenegger imitation" and "Mom playing Glenn Close in one of her psycho roles. I am the Victim."

She says her mother's "Death Voice," which used to scare her as a child, is not effective anymore, admitting she often leaves her quarreling parents and retreats to her room.

Both parents are obsessed with their work.

Jack Sordino ironically sells insurance while his own daughter's life is out of control. He pays more attention to the sound of his beeper than Melinda's voice. Her mother is the manager of Effert's, a clothing store in downtown Syracuse which is a location many people consider dangerous. Melinda says, "Mom loves doing the things that other people are afraid of. She could have been a snake handler." Describing her mother as a cigarette chain smoker and driven by work, Melinda, from her point of view, depicts a cold person. When Melinda cuts her wrist with a paperclip, her unsympathetic mother complains, "I don't have time for this," concluding that "suicide is for cowards." Mrs. Sordino buys a book about teenage suicide for Melinda to read, assuming this will resolve her angst. Melinda's mother forces her to walk to school when she misses the bus, thus unintentionally exposing her to Andy and causing a setback in her recovery.





Mr. Freeman seems more intuitive and compassionate than any other adult in Melinda's world. An eccentric man who often disregards the rigid expectations of authority figures, he encourages her to strive to express herself artistically beyond basic methods. This creativity parallels Melinda regaining her voice. Freeman could be considered a father figure while Melinda's real father is oblivious to her pain, which is central to her art project. This project assists Melinda to reject her denial of admitting the rape and to proactively seek help and justice. Mr. Freeman is Melinda's mentor and link to sanity. He urges her to "Speak up for yourself—we want to know what you have to say." An ugly man with a "grasshopper body, like a stilt-walking circus guy," he smiles at students and tells them that his course is the "only class that will teach you how to survive." Mr. Freeman wants to help students find their souls.

With his support, Melinda learns to trust her thoughts even if she is unable to give voice to them. His mural of a sunrise represents his optimism.

Melinda's interactions with some faculty shows promise that she will recover retain some interest in school. The librarian is kind and helpful to Melinda, giving her a poster of Maya Angelou. Melinda courteously checks out a stack of books in gratitude. She learns about seed germination from Ms. Keen, the short "gelatinous figure, usually encased in orange polyester," who teaches biology. Feeling sad for Ms. Keen because Melinda suspects she could have done something more substantial with her life than teach high school, Melinda absorbs information which helps her understand how she can achieve her own renewal. Biology class also upsets Melinda.

During frog dissection, Melinda observes her lab partner pinning the frog for examination, which reminds her of Andy restraining her. She becomes agitated that the frog is silent and dead, and emotionally relives her assault: a "scream starts in my gut—I can feel the cut, smell the dirt, leaves in my hair." Melinda faints and laments that doctors only stitched up her cut because she believes that only brain surgery can take away her horrible memories of that night.

Other faculty members are antagonists.

Melinda does not refer to the teachers she most loathes by name to indicate her disrespect. Principal Principal and the Guidance Counselor are more eager to find fault with students than to help them. The counselor warns Melinda that she is not achieving her potential, but Melinda ignores her. Principal Principal and the Guidance Counselor consult with Melinda's parents and determine that a regimen of MISS detention and supervision of her class attendance and homework, in addition to a stint in summer school, will fix Melinda's problems without investigating the complex reasons for the drastic changes in her academic performances and attitudes.

Mr. Neck is a racist, sexist history teacher "hired to coach a blood sport." Sporting a "gray jock buzz cut" and a "whistle around a neck thicker than his head," he assumes he has all of the answers because he has taught at Merryweather High for twentyfour years. He dislikes Melinda from the first time he sees her at orientation. Misinterpreting Melinda's hasty departure from the cafeteria when her shirt is hit with mashed potatoes,





he chastises, "I knew you were trouble the first time I saw you" and smugly boasts, "I can tell you what's going on in a kid's head just by looking in their eyes. No more warnings." Mr. Neck is outspoken about his beliefs. When the ecology club protests a tiger mascot, Mr. Neck loudly expresses his outrage about this attack on school spirit and identity. Mr. Neck reveals his arrogant intolerance for minorities and foreigners when he initiates a debate about whether the United States borders should have been closed to immigrants in 1900. He refuses to let students voice their opinions, relenting only when pressured with legal action. Ironically, Mr. Neck denies Melinda credit for an extensive extra-credit report she prepared about suffragettes' efforts to secure rights for women to express themselves publicly with the vote. He punishes her for not speaking when she delivered her paper to the class and ignores her attempts to resume normalcy. This report shows that Melinda was trying to improve her grades and reengage herself in schoolwork.

Melinda is bemused by her English teacher, whom she dubs Hairwoman because of her half-black, half-orange limp hair which is later transformed by a buzz cut. This teacher also withdraws from society and is unable to look students in the eye. Melinda takes advantage of Hairwoman's behavior and steals a pad of late passes from her, allowing Melinda to come and go as she pleases.

Hairwoman devotes many of her lectures to Nathaniel Hawthorne's literary symbolism, telling students that there is a code of literature which will help them figure out deeper meanings and intended messages.

Melinda identifies with Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter* and wonders if Hester had said "no." Melinda thinks she and Hester would get along, suggesting she could wear an "S for silent, for stupid, for scared. S for silly. For shame."



# Style

## Point of View

*Speak* is written in the first person, in present tense, from the point of view of Melinda Sordino. Although Melinda is barely able to talk, through her first person narrative the reader is instantly intimate with her. We are drawn right into her head, experiencing her fear, anger and sense of humor.

## Setting

Modern Syracuse, New York, is the setting for *Speak*. Most of the action takes place at Merryweather High School and at Melinda's home, with various scenes at the mall and other places nearby.

## Language and Meaning

Author Laurie Halse Anderson has given her heroine a powerful voice, even though the other characters in the book cannot hear it. The words are sharp, vivid, urgent. They catch the reader's gut with Melinda's pain, flood us with tenderness at her wounded soul, make us cheer for her efforts to survive and bring laughter at her bright humor.

## Structure

*Speak* is divided into four Marking Periods, one for each part of the school year. There are many small sections within each marking period—each with a subtitle that entices the reader to go further before putting down the book for the night. Each marking period begins with another attempt by the school to find the right mascot name and ends with Melinda's report card.



## Quotes

"It is my first morning of high school. I have seven new notebooks, a skirt I hate and a stomachache." First Marking Period, pg. 3

"I wasted the last weeks of August watching bad cartoons. I didn't go to the mall, the lake, or the pool, or answer the phone. I have entered high school with the wrong hair, the wrong clothes, the wrong attitude. And I don't have anyone to sit with." First Marking Period, pg. 4

"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." First Marking Period, pg. 9

"I look for the shapes in my face. Could I put a face in my tree, like a dryad from Greek mythology? Two muddy-circle eyes under black-dash eyebrows, piggy-nose nostrils and a chewed-up horror of a mouth. Definitely not a dryad face." First Marking Period, pg. 17

"I don't want to be cool. I want to grab her by the neck and shake her and scream at her to stop treating me like dirt. She didn't even bother to find out the truth-what kind of friend is that?" First Marking Period, pg. 21

"This closet is abandoned-it has no purpose, no name. It is the perfect place for me." First Marking Period, pg. 26

"The same boys who got detention in elementary school for beating the crap out of people are now rewarded for it. They call it football." First Marking Period, pg. 28

"If I ever form my own clan, we'll be the Anti-Cheerleaders. We will not sit in the bleachers. We will wander underneath them and commit mild acts of mayhem." First Marking Period, pg. 30

"I hide in the bathroom until I know Heather's bus has left. The salt in my tears feels good when it stings my lips. I wash my face in the sink until there is nothing left of it, no eyes, no nose, no mouth. A slick nothing." First Marking Period, pg. 45

"There is a beast in my gut, I can hear it scraping away at the inside of my ribs. Even if I dump the memory, it will stay with me, staining me." Second Marking Period, pg. 51

"My family doesn't talk much and we have nothing in common, but if my mother cooks a proper Thanksgiving dinner, it says we'll be a family for one more year. Kodak logic. Only in film commercials does stuff like that work." Second Marking Period, pg. 58

"The tape will not be able to pick up the angry gleam in Mr. Neck's eyes, though. He glares at David the whole time he's speaking. If a teacher stared murder at me for forty-eight minutes, I'd turn into a puddle of melted Jell-O. David stares back." Second Marking Period, pg. 68



"It seems like my parents gave up the magic when I figured out the Santa lie. Maybe I shouldn't have told them I knew where the presents really came from. It broke their hearts." Second Marking Period, pg. 70

"I can see it in my head: a strong old oak tree with a wide scarred trunk and thousands of leaves reaching to the sun. . . But when I try to carve it, it looks like a dead tree, toothpicks, a child's drawing. I can't bring it to life. I'd love to give it up. Quit. But I can't think of anything else to do, so I keep chipping away at it." Second Marking Period, pg. 78

"I just want to sleep. 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." Second Marking Period, pg. 82

"IT found me again. I thought I could ignore IT. There are four hundred other freshman in here, two hundred female. Plus all the other grades. But he whispers to me. I can smell him over the noise of the metal shop and I drop my poster and the masking tape and I want to throw up and I can smell him and I run and he remembers and he knows. He whispers in my ear." Second Marking Period, pg. 86

"You never think about the mall being closed. It's always supposed to be there, like milk in the refrigerator or God." Third Marking Period, pg. 98

"I want to be in fifth grade again. . . Fifth grade was easy-old enough to play outside without Mom, too young to go off the block. The perfect leash length." Third Marking Period, pg. 99

"Nothing good ever happens at lunch. The cafeteria is a giant sound stage where they film daily segments of Teenage Humiliation rituals." Third Marking Period, pg. 104

"Mr. Freeman: 'Art without emotion is like chocolate cake without sugar. It makes you gag. . . The next time you work on your trees, don't think about trees. Think about love, or hate, or joy, or rage-whatever makes your toes curl. . . When people don't express themselves, they die one piece at a time.'" Third Marking Period, pg. 122

"Mr. Freeman thinks I need to find my feelings. How can I not find them? They are chewing me alive like an infestation of thoughts, shame, mistakes." Third Marking Period, pg. 125

"Mr. Freeman: 'This looks like a tree, but it is an average ordinary, everyday, boring tree. Breathe life into it. Make it bend-trees are flexible, so they don't snap. Scar it, give it a twisted branch-perfect trees don't exist. Nothing is perfect. Flaws are interesting. Be the tree.'" Fourth Marking Period, pg. 153

"There is no way they can punish me for not speaking. . . What do they know about me? What do they know about the inside of my head? Flashes of lightning, children crying. Caught in an avalanche, pinned by worry, squirming under the weight of doubt, guilt. Fear." Fourth Marking Period, pg. 157



"If my life were a TV show, what would it be? If it were an After-School Special, I would speak in front of an auditorium of my peers on How Not to Lose Your Virginity. Or, Why Seniors Should Be Locked Up. Or, My Summer Vacation: A Drunken Party, Lies and Rape." Fourth Marking Period, pg. 164

"The time has come to arm-wrestle some demons. Too much sun after a Syracuse winter does strange things to your head, makes you feel strong, even if you aren't." Fourth Marking Period, pg. 180

"I crouch by the trunk, my fingers stroking the bark, seeking a Braille code, a clue, a message on how to come back to life after my long undersnow dormancy. I have survived. I am here. Confused, screwed up, but here. . . Is there a chain saw of the soul, an ax I can take to my memories or fears? . . .A small, clean part of me waits to warm and burst through the surface. Some quiet Melindagirl I haven't seen in months. That is the seed I will care for." Fourth Marking Period, pg. 189

"Sometimes I think high school is one long hazing activity: if you are tough enough to survive this, they'll let you become an adult. I hope it's worth it." Fourth Marking Period, pg. 191

"IT happened. There is no avoiding it, no forgetting. No running away, or flying, or burying, or hiding. 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. And I'm not going to let it kill me. I can grow." Fourth Marking Period, pg. 198



# Adaptations

In 2000, *Speak* was adapted for audio by Listening Library in an unabridged reading by Mandy Siefried. Maria Mercedes Correa translated *Speak* into the Spanish edition *Habla!*, which was published in 2000.

Critics often compare the protagonist of John Marsden's *So Much to Tell You* (1990) with Melinda. Both girls have been silenced by tragedy, but Marsden's character is completely mute. In Michael Cadnum's *Rundown* (1999), the main character Jennifer falsely reports a rape attempt in a futile effort to gain her parents' attention. They are as disconnected from her emotional needs as Melinda's parents are. Jennifer withdraws much like Melinda. Many of Cadnum's young adult novels feature teenagers confronted with material abundance and cultural extremes and who exhibit psychological distress in reaction to their environments, families, and peers. His characters have access to alcohol, drugs, and money, and their lives often become out-of-control due to their impulsiveness and poor decisions.

Miracle McCloy, the main character in Han Nolan's *Dancing on the Edge* (1997), creates a fantasy life to remove herself from the harsh realities of life with her dysfunctional family. Intervention in the form of hospitalization helps Miracle gain her voice to express her unhappiness. Nolan's other books, such as *A Face in Every Window* (1999), share themes with *Speak*, including parental neglect and mental confusion. The main character in Lisa Rowe Fraustino's *Ash* (1995) is also isolated from mainstream society because of his mental illness. Fraustino edited the anthology *Dirty Laundry: Stories About Family Secrets* (1998), in which short stories describe different ways silences and omissions can be harmful or beneficial.

Postmodern high school culture is skillfully presented in Rob Thomas's novels *Rats Saw God* (1996) and *Slave Day* (1997).

His characters are disillusioned like Melinda and attend schools that could be clones of Merryweather High, with cliques and inane rules and activities. Thomas's characters often can only express themselves creatively because they are otherwise silenced.

The protagonist and several other characters in Dori Jones Yang's *The Secret Voice of Gina Zhang* (2000) live in silence like Melinda and function on the periphery of their classmates and community. This novel describes how physical assaults intensify muteness as a coping mechanism.



## Topics for Discussion

In the first section, what are the signs that Melinda has experienced a trauma?

Why do you think Melinda's best friends from middle school turned against her immediately rather than asking what happened?

If you were one of Melinda's friends from middle school, do you think you would just drop her as a friend? Would you try to communicate with her, support her? How?

What are the signs Melinda's parents should notice that would make them realize she's had something terrible happen? Why didn't Melinda confide in them?

Try putting yourself in the place of Melinda's parents for a moment. How do you think they view Melinda? Why, from their point of view, do they feel such frustration with her?

What are some of the ways Melinda has developed to help herself cope?

Do you think Melinda suffers from post-traumatic stress? Why or why not?

How does the tree she's working on in art class symbolize what's happening with Melinda?

How do you think it feels to Melinda when she triumphs over Andy Evans?

What do you think will happen with Melinda next?

1. Why does Melinda keep her rape a secret? When should she have told someone? Who could she have asked for help?

2. What does alcohol symbolize in this novel?

3. How do the changing mascots reflect Melinda's ambivalence? Is she a product of her environment?

4. What does friendship mean to each character? Do they comprehend what love is? How and why do relationships between characters change? Who do you envision being friends in the future?

5. Why are the foreign exchange students significant to plot development and characterizations?

6. How are Melinda's mother and Heather similar? How do Melinda and Heather use each other? Is there any basis for true friendship?

7. How do the cliques and their informal names symbolize the disunity of high school culture? Why is it so important for each character to be identified with a specific group?



Why is not belonging undesirable? Discuss the roles of conformity, independence, assumptions, expectations, ostracism, and exclusion in teenage social systems.

8. Does the literary technique of withholding information and not divulging what happened to Melinda successfully heighten tension or frustrate readers? When does Anderson first provide a name instead of a pronoun for Melinda's attacker? Does this anonymous delay make Andy seem more sinister?

9. How does Melinda's successful resistance against Andy's second attack effectively bring resolution to the plot? Discuss the effectiveness of her minor acts of vengeance toward Andy, particularly writing his name in the bathroom graffiti and warning her former friend about him, foreshadow her recovery? Should she be punished for vandalizing school property?

10. Are males and females in this novel ever depicted stereotypically? Is this necessary for characterization?

11. Why is the weather and passage of seasons significant to plot development and the novel's tone? How does dividing the book by grading periods make readers aware of Melinda's mental decline?





# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research the topic of teen violence, both physical and psychological, directed toward other teenagers. Make a list of violent crimes that teenagers commit, such as armed robbery, date rape, and murder. Can a profile be established of typical offenders and victims?
2. Pick an object for an art project similar to that which Mr. Freeman assigned Melinda. Present it creatively as a painting, sculpture, poem, or some other artistic form.
3. Define the various types of sexual harassment, such as name calling, grabbing, gesturing, writing obscenities, or displaying pornography. Which forms do characters encounter in this novel? What motivates people to sexually harass others? How are both females and males victimized by sexual harassment? Distinguish between harassment and flirting.
4. Write a report about the symptoms such as sleeplessness and anxiety that a victim of sexual assault might experience. Which ones does Melinda exhibit? Pretend you are her counselor and write a profile describing how she has reacted to her rape. What medical concerns might a physician have for Melinda's health?
5. If you were Melinda's friend, what advice would you give her? Compose an essay with your response as well as several paragraphs showing how, if you were Melinda, you would confide in someone you trusted.
6. Script a readers' theater for the scene in which Melinda makes the 911 call, creating possible dialogue she might have spoken if she had been able to find her voice.
7. Compose two editorials, one promoting teacher interaction with students' personal problems and another criticizing faculty involvement in students' private lives.
8. Research clinical depression, particularly among teenagers, and write a paper citing evidence that Melinda suffers this condition. Did you ever worry Speak 379 that she might commit suicide? Consult sources such as Lyn Mikel Brown's, *Raising Their Voices: The Politics of Girls' Anger* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998) to study how scholars interpret depression and anger as exhibited by adolescent females.
9. How representative is this novel of American high school culture? Are there aspects of the high school experience that are universal to students in other countries? Write a newspaper article about an issue such as raves, drug/ alcohol abuse, date rape, cliques, or school violence, including the point of view of at least five students representing both American and foreign perspectives.
10. Could Melinda's story be told in another setting or is it essential that she be physically present at school? Is high school a microcosm of American culture and are attitudes toward people perceived as weaker and unimportant?



Defend your answers in a brief essay.

11. Discuss the importance of family to teenagers, providing both general and personal observations.

12. What is the difference between sexual harassment and sexual discrimination?

Does Melinda encounter both? Do you think the author has written this novel to promote a specific agenda?



## Further Study

Adams, Lauren. Review of *Speak*. *Horn Book Magazine*, vol. 75 (September/October 1999): 605-606. Adams recommends *Speak* because of its main characters "smart and savvy interior narrative" that "also nails the high-school experience cold."

Adams concludes, "An uncannily funny book even as it plumbs the darkness, *Speak* will hold readers from first word to last."

"Anderson, Laurie Halse." In *Something about the Author*, vol. 95. Detroit: Gale, 1998. This is a biographical sketch of Anderson and a list of resources prior to the publication of *Speak*.

Brown, Jennifer M. "In Dreams Begin Possibilities." *Publishers Weekly*, vol. 246 (December 20, 1999): 24-25. Brown tells how Anderson wrote *Speak* after awaking from a nightmare, comments on her other sources of inspiration, and provides details about Anderson's professional and personal life. Brown also says *Speak* "is remarkable for both Melinda's strong voice—an ironic twist for a character who rarely speaks but has a pungent internal monologue—and for its taut structure."

Carton, Debbie. Review of *Speak*. *Booklist*, vol. 96 (September 15, 1999): 247. Carton says that "Anderson perfectly captures the harsh conformity of high-school cliques and one teen's struggle to find acceptance from her peers." Carton concludes, "Melinda's sarcastic wit, honesty, and courage make her a memorable character whose ultimate triumph will inspire and empower readers."

O'Malley, Judy. Review of *Speak*. *Book Links*, vol. 9 (January 2000): 54. O'Malley recommends *Speak* because "The important subject of rape is often difficult to broach with teens" and "This novel powerfully addresses the 'unspeakable' nature of this crime in our society."

Sherman, Dina. Review of *Speak*. *School Library Journal*, vol. 45 (October 1999): 144. Sherman remarks that the book contains "sharp, crisp writing" and compliments Anderson for her ability to "[express] the emotions and the struggles of teenagers perfectly."

Smith, Sally. Review of *Speak*. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, vol. 43 (March 2000): 585-587. Smith's interpretative article explains that *Speak* is psychologically valuable for using Melinda as an example because her silence represents that which afflicts many young girls as they enter adolescence and secondary school.

Smith says Anderson's "novel illuminates the experiences of adolescent girls . . . which focuses on the need to take the struggle away from the individual girl and locate it in the school and community."



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