

Analysis of Laurie Halse Anderson's Speak Essay



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Taylor Cummins R. S. Huttman Honors English IV 20 December 2011 Finding a Voice Laurie Halse Anderson, author of *Speak*, is no stranger to the world of censorship and book banning. Born on October 23, 1961 in northern New York, Anderson was in the literary world from the beginning ("*Speak-Anderson*"). She received a Bachelor's degree in Languages and Linguistics in 1984 after transferring to Georgetown University ("*Speak-Anderson*"). [Anderson] began her career as an author of three picture books: *No time for Mother's Day* (1998), *Turkey Pox* (1996), and *Ndito Runs* (1996)" ("*Speak-Anderson*"). Don Latham summarizes Anderson's *Speak* as "the story of teenager Melinda Sordino's rape, recovery, and eventual coming out as a rape victim" (Latham). *Speak* is a novel that is geared towards young adults who could possibly relate to Melinda and her story; however, the novel has faced countless criticisms for its crudity and inappropriateness. Despite critics, Anderson's *Speak* immediately received astonishing recognition. [The novel] has been nominated for the 1999 National Book Award for Young People's Literature, [the] Printz Honor, and Top Ten First Novels of 1999, and many more" ("*Speak-Anderson*"). Regardless of accomplishments, Anderson is continuously questioned about the content of her novel. In response, Anderson says: I've dealt with depression my entire life... which makes me the perfect author for teenage readers... So I spent a long time not looking and not speaking about things that really hurt me... everything about my writing of *Speak* had to do with me watching [my daughter] and not wanting her to go through what I went through (Anderson). Anderson subtly uses anecdotes and life lessons she has learned herself while growing up to translate over to her writing. In *Speak*, Laurie Halse Anderson addresses disturbing and sensitive issues, giving it reason to be banned;

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however, the impact it has on the literary world, as well as the world of teenagers, outshines its vulgarity. Censorship regarding literature has been an age-old controversy.

Sheltering children from books for protection is argued as being dangerous. Censoring books and book banning is mainly an issue on the educational level concerning the youth. "Usually the book at issue has to do with sex or morality" (Gottfried 104). When books have topics that are seen as inappropriate, objections arise and lead to boycotting and sheltering the material from the youth. "When [censorship] is exercised by institutions such as schools, colleges, and universities, it falls into a category known as *in loco parentis*... *in loco parentis* is acting with parental authority... This means that while a student is on the premises, the institution can and should act as a parent" (Gottfried 102). Giving educational establishments the power to decide what is fit for students could potentially be disastrous. However, the Supreme Court upheld this power in the case of *Board of Education v Pico* (1982). In this case, the Court decided that "school boards must be permitted to establish and apply their curriculum in such a way as to transmit community values" (Gottfried 105).

This gives institutions the discretion to decide what they want to expose to the youth. Steve McKinzie, of Covenant Syndicate, supports the Court's decision. He has come to this conclusion: Parents who challenge the inclusion of a given text in a specific literature class and citizens who openly protest a library's collection development decision are only speaking out about things that they believe in... Let people speak out about what they care

about without being branded a censor or labeled a book burner (Gottfried 105).

On the contrary, Kerry Paul Altman, a mother of a child where censorship is a constant issue, disagrees. Instead, she believes: ...forbidding our children access to literature that explores complex, if at times disturbing social realities is naive and potentially dangerous, as it does nothing to prepare them for the responsibilities and challenges of citizenship and community living. It is equivalent to sticking one's head in the sand and just about as effective (Gottfried 106). Parents have the difficult task of answering their children's questions about growing up and life.

However, sometimes one does not know how to answer, or children are too afraid to ask. This is when the youth look to other sources than just their parents; such as books, articles, and the internet. Taking away a book that could potentially teach children essential lessons they need to know could lead to a youth who is uninformed and unprepared for life's most difficult situations. Prohibiting a book due to mature content displays ignorance. It is ignorant for one to think that the mature content within a book, such as *Speak*, does not happen in the lives of teenagers.

Who is one to say a student would not understand the message of a book, or that it will have a negative influence? Today's youth is exposed to more than one could even dream of; simply banning a book will not rid a child's life of the reality within its pages. On the topic of bowdlerization and banning, Judy Blume once said, "[I]t's not just the books under fire now that worry me. It is the books that will never be written. The books that will never be read. And

all due to the fear of censorship. As always, young readers will be the real losers" (Anderson "Challenges").

The long term effects of book banning and censoring can be catastrophic to the literature. The literary masterpieces often deal with stories that go above and beyond what is considered proper; for example, the story of Hamlet is based off of incestuous affairs that lead to the murder of Hamlet's father. A more modern example is *The Secret Life of Bees*; a story about a girl who lives a life of fear from child abuse and thus finds refuge with an African American family during the racial partition known as the Civil Rights Movement.

Both of these works of art went against what society saw as suitable, and are, in return, taught in schools every day. Just because a few parents and citizens find some material obscene or offensive does not mean the youth should be deprived from reading it; that is just simply an opinion. Some banned books put cold, hard reality on paper, and people just don't want to accept it. In the words of Chris Crutcher: "When adults censor a book, the message they send to the children is, 'don't talk about it. We don't want to hear it'" (Andersen).

This is exactly the point Kerry Paul Altman was trying to make. In an article, Peta Andersen states the "three major reasons books are banned...sexually explicit material, offensive language, and unsuitability for a given age group" (Andersen). Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* falls under all three. Due to the subjects of rape, teenage rebellion, premarital sex, and disturbing issues dealing with depression, *Speak* has always been a controversial novel when

it comes to book banning. The blunt nature and lewdness of *Speak* gives an evident reason as to why it is a frequently banned book.

However, there is more behind Anderson's novel than sex and rebellion. Anderson's purpose through *Speak* was to create awareness. While the novel is crude, the topics it deals with are not fantasized; they are real issues that happen to the youth and go unnoticed. Laurie Halse Anderson says she is "shocked whenever anyone challenges *Speak*. This is a story about the emotional trauma suffered by a teen after a sexual assault...Throughout the entire book, she struggles with her pain, and tries to find the courage to speak up...so she can get some help" (Anderson "Challenges").

While the thought of sexual assault happening to teenagers is disturbing enough, it opens the eyes of the readers to a hidden reality that is rarely spoken about. On the subject of banning *Speak*, Laurie Halse Anderson responds: Censoring books like *Speak* is dangerous...because 'Censorship protects adults who feel inadequate, not up to the task of talking about whatever the difficult topic is at hand. You censor books...you don't have to be the parent who answers those difficult questions. We don't talk about these things' (Anderson). One cannot pretend that disgraces such as sexual assault do not exist.

As Anderson says, "Education is supposed to prepare children for the world. While it would be nice to pretend that sexual assault does not exist, a quick glance at the statistics proves otherwise" (Anderson "Challenges").

Statistics show that "1 in 6 women will be the victims of a completed or attempted rape in her lifetime. 44% of those rape victims are under the age

18. 17. 7 million American women [total] have been victims of attempted or completed rape" (Anderson "Challenges"). The subject is unavoidable and Anderson's *Speak* should not be compromised because no one wants to talk about it.

Anderson goes on to explain that *Speak* is not only important in voicing an unmistakable reality, but also to the literacy of students in the United States. Anderson states: "If we don't hand [students] books that they feel connected to particularly in the emotionally charged years of their adolescence...they stop reading. And generally, when a person stops reading, whatever grade level they are at that point when they stop reading for pleasure, tends to be the grade level that their literacy freezes at for the rest of their life...books like *Speak* are a vital to levels of literacy in the U.S.... they're getting to read books that make sense to them, and they actually want to turn the pages" (Anderson). Yes, *Speak* is unconventional when it comes to the topics it addresses, and yes, it stresses the emotions; but Anderson uses this novel to stretch the level of comfort in society. Not only does she use Melinda's story to force readers to see a social issue which they have been blind to, but she also uses a story readers can relate to, which keeps their attention. In an interview, Anderson said, "When *Speak* was published, there was some whispering that this was not an appropriate topic for teens.

I knew from my personal experience, it was" (Staino). She claims, "Teenagers know that sexuality exists, they know what rape is, and way too many of them have suffered it" (Anderson "Challenges"). Anderson knows people in society desire to dodge the thought of sexual assault and rape

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happening to the youth of their community and that some will go to the extent trying to push the thought to the back of their mind. To do so, banning *Speak* is the easiest way to avoid it. One man crossed a line when making a statement on the banning of *Speak*.

The man was Wesley Scroggins, an “associate professor of management at Missouri State University” (Staino). Wesley Scroggins “is cautioning parents of the Republic School District against what he refers to as ‘soft porn’ books used in the curriculum, including *Speak*, which is about rape” (Staino).

Wesley Scroggins writes: In high school English classes, children are required to read and view material that should be classified as soft pornography...

Speak...is a book about a very dysfunctional family.

School teachers are losers, adults are losers and the cheerleading squad scores more than the football team. They have sex on Saturday night and then are goddesses at church on Sunday morning...the book and movie both contains two rape scenes (Andersen). Scroggins' outburst about *Speak* created a response of dismay and outrage. Blogs concerning the burst popped up overnight showing incessant support for Anderson and her novel (Staino). When asked in an interview about the amount of support for *Speak*, Anderson had nothing but sublime comments: I am suddenly fielding requests for interviews and commentary.

Countless people have established giveaways and donations of *Speak*...I wrote the book...My readers took up the challenge and are now speaking very loudly. They have slammed Scroggins' comparison of rape to pornography and are demanding that school boards everywhere follow the

letter and the spirit of the First Amendment of our Constitution (Staino).

Anderson's fans and supporters have definitely done her, and *Speak*, justice with their offended rejoinder. However, Scroggins' malevolent comment hit Anderson close to home.

Laurie Halse Anderson reveals the significance of *Speak* to her own life and her own experiences; so when Wesley Scroggins went so far to call it "soft pornography," Anderson certainly resented it. She reacted by saying: The word 'pornographic' means 'sexually titillating, sexually exciting'...That's the point of pornography...to appeal to someone's sexual urges. If the rape of a 14 year old, 13 year old girl sexually excites you, you need to go to jail... the fact that he classifies that as pornography really disturbs me. That's just wrong...*Speak*...is not about rape.

Speak is about the struggle to find the courage to *Speak* up when something terrible has happened (Anderson). Anderson unquestionably felt challenged on a personal level by Scroggins' comment as did many of her followers and supporters who deeply connected with *Speak*. Anderson sums up the Scroggins controversy by saying, "These readers have changed the world by declaring that rape victims have nothing to be ashamed of, but that book banners like Scroggins do" (Staino). The amount of hearts and lives Anderson touched through *Speak* is undeniable. It is evident in blogs, letters, survival stories, and web pages.

In a compilation of letters to authors, Debbie expresses how *Speak* changed her life in her own letter to Anderson: I am just writing to say that *Speak* is probably the most wonderful book I have ever read because you touched my

soul with your writing...[I] used it as an escape—until I finally got my voice back...Your book made me laugh and it made me cry; it made me feel; it made me talk...The two years before reading it, I sulked, stopped eating, began to do crazy things, and convinced myself that cutting myself would ease the pain...I convinced myself that I had nothing to live for; I just wanted to die...*Speak* made me realize that you can't bottle things inside because it will ruin who you are as a person and cause emotional pain for you and for others, even your best friends and family...I actually trust people now.

Since reading your book after I told, I have a new respect for myself that even the professionals have not been able to give me. I feel empowered, because I knew after reading it that I was not alone, and that I could be happy again. I got the courage Melinda demonstrated...In closing, I want to personally thank you for writing a book that helped me so much in my life. I might not be here if not for you. Sincerely, Debbie (Debbie 1-3). This passage is full of passion and heart. This alone is attestation that *Speak* is not just some raunchy novel about rampant teenage sex. It's a journey through a hardship that has deeply touched the hearts of many.

Anderson has said, "...thousands and thousands of readers...connected with me to thank me for the book. They said it made them feel less alone and gave them the strength to speak up about being sexually assaulted and other painful secrets" (Staino). Anderson then expands on those who spoke up and told their stories: I have heard from many survivors of sexual assault who told me that they didn't dare tell anyone about being attacked. They held in the physical and emotional trauma, sometimes for decades...I have

heard from even more people who were not raped, but who found a piece of themselves in Melinda. Her story strengthened them too (Staino).

Letters and emails, such as Debbie's, are endless. Danielle Brunner expressed her gratitude through an email crediting *Speak* with "starting her 'on a path to freedom'" (Andersen). Anderson hopes that her novel will still help many kids to come. She knows there are still many out there "in Melinda's position—struggling with depression and teetering on the edge of disaster—but people don't pay attention unless they do something drastic" ("*Speak* Analysis"). Anderson's anger toward this trend is clear and understandable. As she puts it, it makes her "so angry I could scream...or better yet, write a book," which is exactly what she did ("*Speak* Analysis").

Laurie Halse Anderson's words have touched the lives of millions, and also saved many in between. The fact that *Speak* is an inspiration to keep on living to readers should surmount the arguments against its crudeness and vulgarity. "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 Melinda girl I haven't seen in months. That is the seed I will care for" (Anderson *Speak*). This quote comes from the novel and highlights Anderson's main purpose: coming to peace with one's self and speaking up. There is no doubt *Speak* is a controversial book, and it always will be; but there is room to compromise.

The novel speaks out to high school students in their vulnerable years of adolescence. They should not be sheltered from a topic that could unfortunately become a potential reality for some. Restrict *Speak* to high school students only; the topics within the novel are complex and may not

be fully understood by the younger youth. However, it should not be banned all together. Some still may argue that high school students should not be exposed to this kind of material. Although this may be true to some extent, one cannot deny that these students are exposed to material that could be considered worse on television, newspapers, and school. Times and society has changed.

Exposure to topics such as sexual assault and rape are inevitable. Although *Speak* has its moments that are inappropriate, the overall message and purpose of the novel outshines it all. Anderson is able to prove that these are real issues experienced by teenagers every day, and they cannot be avoided; furthermore, why would anyone want to avoid them? Rape and sexual assault is the last thing anyone would wish upon even their worst enemy. It would seem that covering the topic up wouldn't do any good at all. Anderson defies the social norm by producing a work of literature so controversial and disturbing, but yet so innocent and pure, that she forces people to listen and to speak up.

The contributions *Speak* made in the lives of its readers, and also in the world of literature, exceed arguments of obscenity. *Speak* should not solely be judged on the unpleasant topic it deals with. It should also be judged by the apparent character and motive behind its story; and for that, *Speak* is a vital piece of literature that should stay on bookshelves. Works Cited

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