

The power of words: a speak analysis



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Sometimes, ignoring reality is easier than facing it. When traumatizing events occur, repression is a common coping mechanism used to deal with one's feelings and thoughts. As an unknown person once said, however, "When something bad happens you have three choices. You can let it define you, let it destroy you, or you can let it strengthen you." In the novel *Speak*, written by Laurie Halse Anderson, Melinda Sordino experiences this lesson firsthand. In the story, Melinda is outwardly quiet – on the inside, however, she is everything but silent. As the novel progresses, Melinda gradually learns to both accept herself and open up to other people. Throughout the novel, Anderson's development of Melinda's character shows the reader how people's negative experiences do not have to define them.

When Melinda first describes how she came to be a social outcast, she does not attempt to justify her own actions. She explains that the reason she is treated so cruelly by her peers is that she called the police while at a party and broke it up. Instead of trying to elaborate on her motives for doing so or explain her point of view, Melinda seems to avoid further explanation. Due to how vague she is, it is easy for the reader to suspect that something happened to Melinda from the beginning of the novel. While Melinda represses it for much of the novel, however, her true reason for calling the police is one that even she does not want to acknowledge. Later in the novel, Melinda reveals that she was raped at the party, which explains her ambiguity when addressing the subject. Ever since the party, she has been in denial, refusing to acknowledge what happened to herself and other people. When her old friend, Rachel, starts dating the man who raped her, Melinda realizes she needs to accept that she was raped to her in order to

help Rachel avoid being exposed to the same assault. When she says to Rachel, “ I didn’t call the cops to break up the party. I called them because some guy raped me,” she finally acknowledges what happened to her, which signifies a major development in her character (183).

At the beginning of the novel, and throughout the majority of it, Melinda convinces herself that her own feelings and thoughts are irrelevant. She feels as though no one cares about what she has to say, and that her words are merely a burden on others. As she begins to realize that other people do care, and even feel the same as she does, she stops invalidating her own feelings. Near the beginning of the story, Melissa cautions people to stay away from her rapist by writing a warning against him on a bathroom stall. Melissa later revisits the stall that she wrote on, where she is surprised to see that other people supported her. She discovers that many other girls wrote phrases such as “ He’s a creep. He should be locked up. Call the cops.” This event signifies a major turning point for Melissa, as it is the moment that she realizes she is not alone in her opinion (185).

As the reader can tell from the moment Melinda’s character appears, she is not an outgoing or friendly person. She keeps to herself, barely saying a word to others, even when spoken to first. Mostly, her behavior is an outcome of her assault, and the trauma she faces both during and after it. As a result of her rape, Melinda believes that what she has to say is not worth vocalizing. However, after she realizes that her thoughts and feelings are valid, and that her sexual assault and trauma are not insignificant, she gradually becomes more confident in her own words. At the end of the novel, one of the art teachers acknowledges that Melinda has been through a lot.

Melinda then realizes that her hesitation about speaking is gone, and says to him, “ Let me tell you about it” (198).

Throughout *Speak*, Melinda undergoes experiences that mold her as a person and help her accept and learn to cope with her rape. Rather than letting it define her and ruin her life, Melinda overcomes her fear. She learns that her words and actions hold power, and that speaking up can aid both herself and others. Although Melinda is in denial throughout much of the novel, she later learns that lying to herself about the assault she faced is worse than acknowledging it – and that speaking her mind is a critical step in overcoming her trauma. By talking to others, she frees herself from the isolation she once resigned herself to. In the end, Melinda realizes that what happened to her in the past does not define her value or identity as a person, and that life goes on. She just has to take the first step on the path to recovery.