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Speak

by

Laurie Halse Anderson
1999



MonkeyNotes by Diane Clapsaddle

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

Speak is set in Syracuse, New York, in the specific neighborhood and school - Merryweather High School - of Melinda Sordino in the present day.

CHARACTER LIST

Melinda Sordino - She is a sophomore in Merryweather High School, Syracuse, New York. She is terribly unhappy, because she is the victim of a vicious rape and so spends her entire ninth-grade year trying to come to terms with what happened to her. She refuses to speak most of the time and she misbehaves in

Melinda's parents - Their dissatisfaction with their own lives and their marriage contributes to.....

Mr. Freeman - He is the Art teacher who has his own issues with a school board who will provide him with no supplies with which to teach. However, he is the only adult who tries to understand.....

David Petrakis - He is Melinda's biology lab partner and is one of the few students in the school who will speak to her. She comes to admire him very much for his brilliance, his willingness to.....

Andy Evans - Also known as IT or Beast or a wolf, he is the rapist who gets away with what he.....

Heather from Ohio - She is a new girl who befriends Melinda at the beginning of the.....

Rachel/Rachelle - Melinda's best friend since elementary school, she is at the party where Melinda is raped. After Melinda calls the cops and the party is raided, she stops.....

Ivy - Another of Melinda's friends, she, too, stops talking to her for awhile, but sees in their

Hairwoman - This is the name that Melinda gives her English teacher. She feels little more than.....

Mr. Neck - He is the social studies teacher who also happens to be a racist. David Petrakis challenges.....

Principal Principal - This is Melinda's name, obviously, for the principal of her school. He is the.....

The Jocks, the Country Clubbers, the Idiot Savants, the Cheerleaders, Marthas, etc. -These are names of clans that the students at Merryweather High School have formed to have friends and.....

CONFLICT

Protagonist - The protagonist of a story is the main character who traditionally undergoes some sort of change. He or she must usually overcome some opposing force. The protagonist in this novel is Melinda Sordino, a ninth-grader at Merryweather High School who must find some way to deal with.....

Antagonist - The antagonist of a story is the force that provides an obstacle for the protagonist. The antagonist does not always have to be a single character or even a character at all. One of the antagonists is Andy Evans, a senior who raped Melinda at the end-of-the-summer party when she was too.....

Climax - The climax of a plot is the major turning point that allows the protagonist to resolve the conflict. The climax here occurs when Melinda finally confronts Andy as he tries to rape her the second time. The.....

Outcome - Melinda finds out she has a lot to offer and is able to speak once more. She.....

SHORT PLOT/CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

This novel relates the story of a young girl in Syracuse, New York, who is brutally raped at a party given by one of her friends. She calls the police for help and they arrive to find only a teen party with illegal alcohol. Because none of her friends know about the rape, they believe she called the cops to bust them. As a

THEMES

Strength of Character - The theme of strength of character is the most prevalent theme. Melinda nearly loses that strength completely as she shuts down emotionally, psychologically, and verbally. She cannot speak about what is unspeakable pain until she learns from her experiences throughout the school year.....

Additional themes are outlined in the complete summary.

MOOD

This story is filled with sadness, despair, fear, and loneliness throughout most of the novel. It is.....

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

Laurie Halse Anderson was born Laurie Beth Halse (pronounced Haltz) on October 23, 1961 in Potsdam, New York. She grew up in Syracuse, New York and as a high school student she was an exchange student for 13 months. She lived on a pig farm in Denmark during that time. She attended Onondage Community College for two years and then transferred to Georgetown University, where she graduated in 1984 with a degree in Languages and Linguistics.

She married to Greg Anderson and has two daughters, Stephanie and Meredith. She later.....

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES

Note: The author does not use traditional chapter numbers or section numbers in this novel. They are each given a name. For the purpose of this study guide, we have assigned chapter and part numbers, but please note that they do not appear in the original text.

PART 1 - FIRST MARKING PERIOD

CHAPTER 1 - Welcome to Merryweather High Summary

This chapter begins with Melinda Sordino's first day of high school and she has a stomachache. She fears where to sit on the bus and indicates she's unsure whether any of her friends will talk to her or not. She ends up being the only person sitting alone, even though she's the first pickup of the day. Someone behind her shoots a breakfast wrapper at her head. As they pull up to the school, she sees the janitors painting over the signboard for the school. Melinda observes that calling the school "The Home of the Trojans" doesn't send a strong message of abstinence.

Ninth graders are herded into the auditorium and Melinda notes that they all fall into clans like Jocks, Country Clubbers, Idiot Savants, Cheerleaders, and other cliques to which teenagers seem to need to belong. She tells us she spent the month of August doing nothing and going nowhere. "I have entered high school with the wrong hair, the wrong clothes, the wrong attitude. And I don't have anyone to sit with. I am Outcast." The clan she belonged to the year before, the Plain Janes, has splintered and been absorbed by other groups. She mentions three friends of the year before: Nicole, Ivy and Jessica, who has moved away. Her best friend was Rachel Bruin, who now sits behind Melinda laughing at her and mouthing the words, "I hate you." Melinda bites her lips so as not to think about it.

She is the only one left standing when Mr. Neck, the social studies teacher, enters the auditorium and orders her to sit. She describes him as a predator with a gray jock buzz cut and a whistle around a neck thicker than his head. She finds a seat beside “another wounded zebra” who says she is “Heather from Ohio.” She is new to the district. Melinda thinks to herself that there are ten lies they tell you in high school, the first being, “We are here to help you.” The other nine are equally sarcastic. After the assembly for the freshmen, Melinda is late to class, because she can’t find the biology room. She receives her first demerit and thinks there are only 699 days and seven class periods until graduation

Notes

The reader is quickly introduced to the narrator of the story who seems intelligent, creative, and deeply sad. There is no doubt that something happened in August before her freshman year in high school that left her friendless and outcast. She mentions having friends during her eighth grade year, but now they refuse to associate with her and even tell her that they hate her. She is a keen observer of all the bad parts about high school and reserves her sarcasm for those things that are the most ridiculous, like changing the name of the school mascot to avoid any sexual references by the students. She also has little use for teachers as evidenced by her description of Mr. Neck (not really his name, but one by which we will know him for the rest of the story). He is a “predator,” so we can assume that he will be a thorn in her side before the story is complete.

Melinda does make a friend of sorts: Heather from Ohio, who has “at least five grand worth of orthodontia, but has great shoes.” Melinda’s list of the ten lies they tell you in high school is representative of her self-proclaimed bad attitude, but also reflects the despair she feels as she enters this new world. Something has gone seriously wrong in Melinda’s life. She agonizes for high school to be over.

CHAPTER 2 - Our Teachers Are the Best

Summary

Melinda’s second commentary on a teacher concerns her English teacher whom she christens Hairwoman, because her hair is black from her part to her ears and then neon orange to the frizzy ends. Melinda explains that Hairwoman takes twenty minutes to take attendance, because she won’t look at the students. The rest of the period is spent with her standing at the board, her back to the class, discussing the required reading and their journals. Once again, she is scheduled for American History for the ninth time in nine years. She sarcastically observes that they never get past The Industrial Revolution and that they only made it to World War I once. “Who knew there had been a war with the whole world?” Her social studies teacher is Mr. Neck who remembers how he had to order her to sit in the auditorium and now warns her, “I got my eyes on you.”

Notes

Melinda takes this opportunity to describe two of her teachers, Hairwoman and Mr. Neck. She doesn’t call them by their actual names, perhaps to reflect how little she respects them or perhaps because she is too wounded to allow herself to feel any kind of admiration for anyone. It’s easier to point out their shortcomings than to identify with them in any way.

CHAPTER 3 - Spotlight

Summary

In this section of First Marking Period, Melinda finally finds her locker and then heads for the cafeteria. She observes that you never bring a lunch the first day of high school, because you never know what the acceptable fashion will be. She doesn’t know how to order anything, so she just allows the “drones” to fill a tray with the day’s general menu and looks for a place to sit down. She sees those girls who used to be her friends, but they just look away. She is behind a basketball player who finds the rest of his team. One of his friends throws some mashed potatoes and gravy at him, but they hit Melinda instead. She thinks she will be forever known as the

“girl who got nailed by mashed potatoes the first day.” The whole cafeteria explodes in laughter and Melinda dumps her tray and bolts for the door.

As she runs for the door, Melinda is stopped by Mr. Neck who has cafeteria duty. He refuses to allow her to leave and Melinda decides it’s easier to just stay silent, because nobody wants to hear what you have to say. He notes in his book that he thought she was trouble the first time he saw her. He has taught for 24 years and believes he can tell what’s going on in a kid’s head just by looking in his eyes. She earns another demerit.

Notes

The first day continues to be a nightmare for Melinda. She is forced into the “spotlight” when all she wants is to somehow get through the agony of being Outcast without attracting too much attention. The humiliation of being snubbed by her friends, being hit with mashed potatoes and gravy, and being given yet another demerit from Mr. Neck makes the “spotlight” unbearable. It is interesting to note, however, that in spite of the fact that she knows how her friends feel about her, she is still anxious, actually determined in some ways, to fit in.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Melinda Sordino - She is an extremely witty, sarcastic thirteen year old who suffers a terrible rape and lives to speak the truth about it. In the interim, however, she endures being labeled an Outcast about a trauma that....

Melinda’s Parents - Melinda’s mother is the manager of a clothing store and her father is an insurance salesman. Both are caught up in their careers and the problems within their.....

Mr. Freeman - Those who grew up in the 60’s and 70’s would definitely label this Art teacher as “anti-establishment.” He is a good man who wants the best for his students, but consistently.....

David Petrakis - He is Melinda’s biology lab partner and somewhat of a romantic interest. He is very patient with her and when she is able to speak, it is often to him. He is also a role model, not only for.....

Andy Evans - Melinda refers to him as IT or the beast or the wolf and he is all of those things. He is a horrible human being who preys on the innocence of young girls who might be impressed with.....

Heather from Ohio - This young girl is new to Merryweather High when Melinda begins her ninth-grade year. Because she is unaware of what happened at the party, she befriends Melinda. However, she.....

Rachel/Rachelle - This is Melinda’s best friend since elementary school. They have shared many memories together and had their own clan in eighth grade which they called the.....

Ivy - She shares Art class with Melinda all year long and once was her friend as well. She slowly

Hairwoman, Mr. Neck and Principal Principal - These teachers for the most part are depicted as almost inhuman. Melinda cannot figure them out most of the time and finds them

The Clans - These are the ultimate reason why high school is so agonizing. They make it

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

The story is narrated by Melinda as she remembers her ninth grade year of high school. It is divided into four major sections, each one representing the events which occurred during each.....

THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

The theme of **strength of character** helps the reader understand what it takes for any individual to overcome major trauma or even just minor setbacks in her life. It is especially geared to young people who are in the terrible stage known as adolescence. So much changes at that time in our lives that we are often beset with confusing signals about our place within our environment and the world at large. Throw in.....

Additional themes are analyzed in the complete summary.

RIISING ACTION

The rising action begins with Melinda Sordino's first day of high school and continues through.....

FALLING ACTION

The falling action involves the last chapter, which takes place during the last day.....

POINT OF VIEW

The entire point of view is from the perspective of Melinda Sordino who relates the events of

GENRE

Fiction/Young Adult/Coming of Age/Rape

OTHER ELEMENTS

FORESHADOWING

There are several other literary devices that pop up at various times in the story. One of the most prevalent ones is **foreshadowing** which frequently presents clues of something that will happen later in the novel. Some examples of foreshadowing include:

- 1.) The fact that Melinda is sitting alone on the first day of school and other students glare at her is an indication that something has happened which isolates her.
- 2.) Mr. Neck's insistence that he "has his eye on her" foreshadows the problems Melinda will have with him throughout the year..... 2 of 15 in the complete summary.

IRONY

Another element that is important to note is **irony** – when something happens, or is seen, or is heard that we may know, but the characters do not, or that appears opposite of what is expected. Some examples of irony include:

- 1.) Melinda has known some of the girls at her school her whole life and yet a totally new student, Heather from Ohio, is the only one who will speak to her on the first day of school.
- 2.) She chooses an abandoned janitor's closet for a hiding place. It is abandoned just like her.....2 of 25 in the complete summary

QUOTES / IMPORTANT QUOTATIONS

(Puffin Books, The Penguin Group and Penguin Books for Young Readers, 1999)

The following quotations are important at various points in the story:

- 1.) **"I am Outcast."** (page 4)

Melinda expresses to the reader immediately at the beginning of the novel the terrible situation she finds herself in as her ninth-grade year begins – no one likes her and she is ostracized wherever she goes.

- 2.) **"It's easier not to say anything . . . Nobody really wants to hear what you have to say."** (page 9)

In this comment, we see that Melinda has decided to deal with what happened to her at the end-of-the-summer party by closing off her voice..... 2 of 31 in the complete summary.

SYMBOLISM/MOTIFS/IMAGERY/SYMBOLS

Other elements that are present in this novel are **symbols and metaphors**. Symbols are the use of some unrelated idea to represent something else. Metaphors are direct comparisons made between characters and ideas. There are many symbols and metaphors used by the author such as:

- 1.) Outcast with a capital T is the name Melinda uses to label herself after her friends ostracize her.
- 2.) The names Melinda gives her teachers are metaphors for their behavior or their looks.
- 3.) Sanctuary is a metaphor for art class and the secret closet....3 of 22 in the complete summary.

IMPORTANT / KEY FACTS SUMMARY

Title: *Speak*

Author: Laura Halse Anderson

Date Published: 1999

Meaning of the Title: It refers to what the main character – Melinda Sordino – cannot do for much of the novel, but she gathers the strength to do by the end. She had been raped and she.....

Setting: Syracuse, New York, present day....

STUDY QUESTIONS - MULTIPLE CHOICE QUIZ

1. How does Melinda label herself as the story begins?
 - a.) Ostracized
 - b.) Outcast
 - c.) Ignored
2. What class becomes a sanctuary and what other place is a safe one for Melinda to use at school?
 - a.) English class and the basement of her house
 - b.) Social Studies and the biology labArt class and the janitor's closet.....2 of 15 in the complete summary.

ANSWER KEY

1.) b 2.) c

ESSAY TOPICS / BOOK REPORT IDEAS

1. Analyze what happened to Melinda at the end-of-the-summer party from her viewpoint, Andy's viewpoint, and the viewpoint of all the kids at the party. How does hiding the truth make matters worse?
2. Discuss Melinda's character before the rape, during her ninth-grade year, and after she confronts Andy, by detailing how she grows and takes back her power..... 2 of 10 in the complete summary.

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