

A Feminist Interpretation of *Speak*

1 out of 6 American women has been a victim of attempted or completed rape in her lifetime (RAINN). Some people find the statistics to be controversial because many rapes go unreported, however it does not change the fact that there is a tremendous societal flaw. America has a crisis that is fueled by perpetual rape culture. Emilie Buchwald defines rape culture as,

“a complex set of beliefs that encourage male sexual aggression and supports violence against women. It is a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent. In a rape culture, women perceive a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape itself. A rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women as the norm . . . In a rape culture both men and women assume that sexual violence is a fact of life, inevitable . . .”

In the book, *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson, one can use feminist criticism to critique the patriarchal ideology which sustains the rape culture.

An inherent part of patriarchal ideology is that women are oppressed by the patriarchy; socially and psychologically. This is accomplished through portraying woman as other; she is defined by what she (allegedly) lacks and men (allegedly) have. Women are objectified and marginalized. In *Speak*, there are two passages that specifically address the objectification of women. The first passage is when Melinda notes men's sexual objectification of women in the school setting: she says that “all the girls avoid” the janitors' lounge “because of the way they stare and whistle softly when we walk by” (26). The staring and whistling are low level on the spectrum of objectification, yet it is enough to make the girls or women uncomfortable. The projection of male desire, especially in a “safe place” such as a school, is a prime example of rape culture. There is no consequence for unwanted and unprovoked sexual desire in inappropriate settings. The second passage is when Melinda observes that Picasso, “had a thing

for naked women. Why not draw them with their clothes on? Who sits around without a shirt on, plucking a mandolin? Why not draw naked guys, just to be fair? Naked women is art, naked guys a no-no, I bet. Probably because most painters are men” (118-119). This passage points out that art has been highly based on the patriarchy and is misogynistic. In the case of Picasso, because he is mentioned in the book, the artwork is strictly the objectification of women. They were painted for the male gaze in assumption that only educated men would be the viewers. In Hannah Gadsby’s comedy sketch, *Nanette*, she specifically calls out Picasso as a misogynist; not only because of his artwork but because he had an affair with a seventeen-year-old when he was in his forties. Gadsby argues that powerful men elevate their own reputations above the lives of the less powerful, and this is more than often young women. The patriarchy continually undermines women’s self-confidence and assertiveness, and through this, women are expected to be self-effacing and submissive.

In addition to the objectification of women, the patriarchy strengthens rape culture by upholding the ideology of traditional gender roles. According to Lois Tyson, “traditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive” (81). Through the traditional binaries, women are portrayed as the inferior sex. An example of women’s inferiority and inequality is when Melinda writes a report on what she calls “the suffragettes” for her history class, on women’s inequality, which feminist theorists often identify as leading to violence against women. Melinda expresses, “before the suffragettes came along, women were treated like dogs. *Women could not vote. *Women could not own property. *Women were not allowed in many schools. They were dolls, with no thoughts, or opinions, or voices of their own” (154-155). Women essentially had no

rights until the 19th amendment was passed. Women were second class citizens. Although society has evolved in that respect, women still come across inequities, such as lesser pay than men, exclusion from leadership positions, and male monopoly of power. There is an underlying fallacy of equality of the sexes. Angela E. Hubler explains, “Melinda’s comment that she thinks “about looking for an old suffragette in a nursing home, but they are probably all dead” (155) reinforces the common view that we live in a postfeminist society in which the goals of feminism are now passé because women have achieved equality” (118). The patriarchy also suggests that men are strong (both physically and emotionally) and they are not permitted to fail at anything, because that would suggest failure of one’s manhood. In *Speak*, while Andy Evans, the rapist is described as a “cover-model”, “Greek God”, being strong, and having a “man kiss” (134-135), feminist criticism undermines it through him also being described “IT” (86) and as a beast (148). Instead of the positive portrayal or “prince charming” role that patriarchy imposes, Andy is reduced to a single syllable, and an un-human state. In addition, Andy’s manhood is questioned after Melinda writes on the bathroom stall for girls to avoid him. She gets an astounding rally of support from girls who write back that he should be locked up, he’s a pervert, and he should be given a medication that renders him unable to have an erection (186). Although the writings are all anonymous, Melinda is able to feel a sense of community from her peers. Before this moment, she feels alone, misunderstood, and at fault for the rape she endured.

Due to rape culture, most often victims feel fear, helplessness, and experience victimization. After the rape, Melinda is alone, scared, and feeling helpless. To combat those feelings, she calls 911 because she recognizes she needs help (136). When her friend Rachel finds her, instead of finding out what was wrong and what happened, she immediately assumed

the 911 phone call was to break up the party and is angered (136). This series of events leads to Melinda continuing to feel alone and helpless, so she shuts down and never speaks to anyone about her experience. Angela E. Hubler states, “Melinda’s narrative focuses on her pain and isolation in the wake of her attack while withholding from the reader the fact that she has been raped until the last third of the novel. Melinda is inspired by the women’s suffrage movement to finally “speak”...encouraged by a poster of Maya Angelou, discloses her rape to her friend Rachel who has begun dating Andy” (116-117). Although this does not go over well, Melinda has finally found her truth and her voice. Hubler also encourages “the feminist effort to politicize what has historically been understood as private” (114). By the end of the book, Melinda is no longer silenced. The patriarchy and rape culture attempt to silence rape victims and push the idea that any sexual act is private. However, this reinforces victim blame as well as silencing the victim. Hubler states, “The feminist emphasis on women’s speech, which seeks to politicize female experience by moving it out of the private and into the public sphere, situating the individual’s experience within a collective one” (116). A collective experience gives strength to the survivors of sexual violence. Politicizing the experience will help change the rape culture.

In addition to feminist criticism of the novel *Speak*, one could also employ psychoanalytic criticism. Sarah Thaller explains,

“Melinda suffers from PTSD after having been raped by an older student at a party the summer before she begins high school. Melinda is a sympathetic character because she is an obvious victim of sexual violence and, most importantly, has the potential to go back to “normal.” Even more poignant and against the actual suggested treatment plan and experience of trauma recovery, Melinda seeks no professional assistance and eventually cures herself. Her condition is not permanent and offers the reader lessons about morality, courage, and perseverance. Of course, the issue is in whether or not a real adolescent can follow her lead (131-132).

Rape is a trauma and many survivors are diagnosed with PTSD. It is often suggested that rape victims seek out professional help to avoid self-harm, destructive behaviors, and potentially suicide. For a young adult novel, it is essential for young adults to recognize when to get help and that they do not have to deal with trauma alone. There is a stigma about mental illness and that could be a reason that the character Melinda did not reach out for help sooner. Hubler points out, “The novel’s focus on the individual psychology of the protagonist and her solitary journey to healing deemphasizes the social factors contributing to rape” (117). The social factors that contributed to the rape were a rape culture, an age difference, social situation (a party), alcohol, and so on. Hubler insists, “the novel suggests that individuals are responsible for preventing rape. Because the first-person narration focuses on Melinda’s psychological state, the representation of social relations and structures that result in rape is restricted” (117). From the single point of view, it seems as though all the adults in her life are against her. Melinda thinks if she tells them about the rape that they will not believe her. The reader can only assume from what Melinda says, that she is alone in conquering her mental instability.

“Let me tell you about it” (198). The last words from Melinda in the book *Speak*. After a year of struggling by herself, coming to terms with her rape, and being victimized, she is finally ready to open-up. Unfortunately, many rape victims have the same experience as Melinda. Victim-blame, disassociation, self-harm, and destructive behaviors are often involved in an experience after sexual trauma. Society has a perpetual rape culture that has been able to withstand change due to the patriarchy. Throughout the book, Laurie Halse Anderson critiques the patriarchy and rape culture, so readers can recognize the affliction and attempt to transform society.

Works Cited

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