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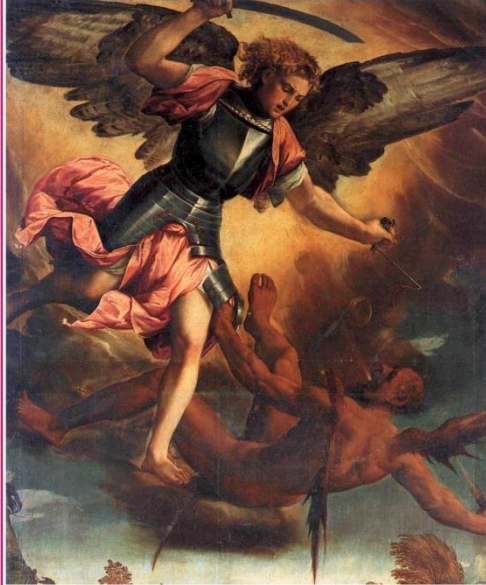
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Quest for Identity and Self- Reclaiming as Shown in Laurie Halse Anderson's Speak

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Abstract

Thematic analysis refers to examining the central idea that controls the entire literary piece. "The theme can take the form of a brief and meaningful insight or a comprehensive vision of life; it may be a single idea such as 'progress' (in many Victorian works).The theme may also be a more complicated doctrine, such as Milton's theme in Paradise Lost, 'to justify the ways of God to men'" ("Literary Terms," 2006, para. T). Laurie Halse Anderson tends to focus on the themes of quest for identity and self- reclaiming in Speak. Theme is an effective way to analyze the author's perceptions or points about life. Over the years, Anderson develops a voice through her works by finding creative ways to express her desires for independence. In this paper, the researcher shows Anderson's ability in creating such an amazing work of fiction that discusses a special problem for teenager in high school in a sensitive way. The novel is not only interesting with a realistic depiction of real life but also it is a lesson for teens, parents and even teachers. In the depiction of teenage characters, Anderson writes from knowledge and perspectives that are her own. She has made significant progress in literature to assert conventional roles of role models in the teenager's life. Undeniably, Anderson writes not only to criticize the problem but also to solve it and construct the future.

Búsqueda De Identidad Y Auto-Recuperación Como Se Muestra En El Discurso De Laurie Halse Anderson

Resumen

El análisis temático se refiere al examen de la idea central que controla toda la pieza literaria. “El tema puede tomar la forma de una visión breve y significativa o una visión integral de la vida; puede ser una idea única como ‘progreso’ (en muchas obras victorianas). El tema también puede ser una doctrina más complicada, como el tema de Milton en *Paradise Lost*, ‘para justificar los caminos de Dios a los hombres’ “(“ Literario Términos ”, 2006, párrafo T). Laurie Halse Anderson tiende a enfocarse en los temas de búsqueda de identidad y auto-recuperación en *Speak*. El tema es una forma efectiva de analizar las percepciones o puntos del autor sobre la vida. A lo largo de los años, Anderson desarrolla una voz a través de sus obras al encontrar formas creativas de expresar sus deseos de independencia. En este documento, el investigador muestra la habilidad de Anderson para crear una obra de ficción tan increíble que discute un problema especial para los adolescentes en la escuela secundaria de una manera sensible. La novela no solo es interesante con una descripción realista de la vida real, sino que también es una lección para adolescentes, padres e incluso maestros. En la representación de personajes adolescentes, Anderson escribe desde el conocimiento y las perspectivas propias. Ella ha hecho un progreso significativo en la literatura para afirmar los roles convencionales de los modelos a seguir en la vida del adolescente. Sin lugar a dudas, Anderson escribe no solo para criticar el problema sino también para resolverlo y construir el futuro.

1. Introduction

Identity” remains one of the most urgent—as well as hotly disputed— topics in literary and cultural studies” (Moya&Hames-Garcia, 2000, p. i). There are many philosophical assumptions about identity and the self, which have sparked an identity war among ideological camps. There are many interpretations of identity or self. Essentialists say that identity is unchanging and framed by an individual’s association with a particular social group. Ignoring internal and historical factors, Essentialists look at one aspect such as gender as a defining factor of one’s existence. Postmodernists affirm that identity is constructed rather than deduced from experience. In

other words, we are who we are based on our surroundings; external forces help shape who we are, which means we are who we are in relation to others. Post positivists argue that identity is more than membership within a social group and more than a social construct, but is also the lived experiences of occupying more than one kind of identity. Post positivist realist theory of identity indicates “that the different social categories (such as gender, race, class, and sexuality) together constitute an individual’s social location are causally related to the experiences she will have”(Ibid., p. 81). For example, an individual coded as a White female may not have the same experiences as an individual coded as a Black female. Post positivist theory purports that all social categories constitute one’s social location and “situate[s] them within the particular social, cultural, and historical matrix in which she exists” (Ibid, p. 82). Experiences will influence, not entirely determine, the formation of one’s cultural identity. Interpretations of experiences help construct identities. In addition to these assumptions, there are many psychological aspects of identity, which are grounded in Freud’s or Piaget’s theories of human development. Freudian in nature, Erikson’s theory of development encompasses the life cycle of an individual. Identity versus identity crises is the fifth stage (12- 18 years), during which Erikson believes children are faced with peer pressures and decisions about future and other social matters. Children are looking to be themselves, find themselves, and/or share themselves (Crain, 2000). Experiences and interactions with others who are facing similar pressures and decisions become important at this stage.

2. Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study is to analyze Anderson’s *Speak* as a trauma novel; particularly sexual assault not only to help teenagers faced this crisis to assert their own voices, identities, and power but also to help parents and teachers to rethink of their relations with these victims and help them to overcome their traumatic situation. Balaev (2008) defines trauma literature as “works of fiction that convey profound loss or intense fear on individual or collective terms” (p.150).

3. Study Questions

The researcher is interested in exploring the following question to achieve the primary goal of the study:

- To what extent, Anderson manages to discuss sexual assault as a risk-talking issue in her novel?
- How does this genre of literature help all interlocutors to create a safe environment for teenagers and encourage survivors to talk about what

happened and start to heal and grow?

4. Significance of the Study

Literature, which is creatively written by an author, is a powerful tool not only for entertainment and appreciation but also it directly and indirectly informs readers with profundity of thought in order to effectively change societies. According to Fox (1993), “Texts are important influences that shape us by reflecting politics and values of our society.” They are not just passive texts which we actively interpret meaning from it, but they are created to mold us through letters (p. 656). Therefore, literary works have had a great impact on readers and the development of society. *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson is chosen for this study because of its popularity and profundity of thought. Children’s literature is a powerful tool to raise awareness among young people. Rovenger (1988) stated that children’s literature is like a moral compass; it is not only “the stuff of memories, but it also can be vital compass point along the byways of life” (pp. 45-46). The significance of this paper comes from the powerful messages sent by Anderson to her readers.

Alsup (2003) in her article on trauma literature such as *Speak* asserts that how these crucial choices of reading can help young people to navigate their sometimes tumultuous lives (p. 158). She draws from Nussbaum (1997), who argues that literature can function as a tool for teaching world citizenship. Alsup continues to discuss how *Speak* can help victims find their voices as the main character, Melinda, struggles to find her own after being raped, asserting that *Speak* might “help [teen readers] cope with problems such as dating violence, divisive peer groups and cliques, and feelings of isolation and alienation from school” (p. 162). Also, Alsup cites Trites (1997) who asserts that voice is essential to girls’ subjectivity, and how “its theme of finding voice (and hence identity and personal power) is one that is mirrored every day in real teenagers’ lives as they seek to become independent, yet integrated, members of their school and home communities” (p. 163). She stresses the dangers of ignoring stories about rape, and that although it may be difficult for teenagers to address these topics, what is more dangerous is having some teenagers think that rape is only something that happens to other people, particularly, some girls and women, and has nothing to do with them (p. 165). Hence, Sitler (2009) confirms “Trauma has always been a part of learning and teaching” (p.119).

5. Laurie Halse Anderson

Laurie Halse Anderson, an American writer, was born on October 23,

1961. She is best known for children's and young adult novels. For Anderson's contribution to young adult literature, she wins the Margaret A. Edwards Award from the American Library Association in 2010. She was first known for her novel *Speak*. (https://en.org/wiki/Laurie_Halse_Anderson). In an interview, Anderson says that she has a reading-rich experience since her childhood. Her aunt encourages her to read by saying "books are good and important and worth dedicating part of your life to" (Fitzgerald & Emralino, Teenreads.com). This experience leads her to write her first words when her second grade teacher taught her to write haiku (a kind of poems). At this time, she began her way in writing and knew that she could do this. She describes her life as an adolescent "I remember my art class, the gospel choir, and, vaguely, social studies...actually a very happy person in real life, but I was not a happy teenager. I struggled with depression"(Mattson, CNN.com). She lives the same experience of her protagonist in *Speak*, she leaves her familiar surroundings as their family moves to outside of Syracuse. Anderson was sexually assaulted at the age of thirteen as Melinda. She went home in shock and did not tell anybody. However, she recognizes that silence is not the best response and encourages survivors to speak out. She argues that we have allowed a stigma of shame to be attached to victims of sexual assault, which explains why it is so often unreported. She writes *Speak* to help teenagers to speak and find their way to heal (Ibid).

6. *Speak*

Speak (1999) which was translated into sixteen languages and had received many awards, is described as a trauma novel. Snider (2014) outlines, some scholars classify *Speak* as "a young adult 'problem novel,' a form of literature which rose to prominence in the 1970s [that] tends to feature first person narrative, an adolescent protagonist, and taboo subject matter" (p. 299). It is written in a diary format and tells the story of Melinda. Melinda Sordino, the fourteen-year-old, is Anderson's protagonist. She was raped by a senior student, Andy Evans at a summer party before her fresh year of high school. Melinda ended up the party calling the police, causing her friends and everyone at the party to socially reject her. She begins her year at Merry weather High School in Syracuse, New York, with this heavy secret. Due to her trauma and inability to tell anyone about what happened, Melinda spirals into a dark depression; loses her ability to speak with ease; and expresses her pain only through physical acts, such as biting her lips and nails. Heather, the new student at Melinda's school, becomes her only friend. Even Heather does not love Melinda but she has

schemes to gain popularity and wants to get Melinda involved in. In fact, Melinda does not intend to share Heather her plan. She dislikes painful interactions with her former friends, so she spends time in her abandoned janitor's closet at school to avoid students and teachers. Her closet is her hide out and latter it plays a vital role to find herself. Art class helps Melinda to find comfort at school. She works a yearlong on a project of tree to create different interpretations. This tree is not only an art project but also a symbol of Melinda's life.

Occasionally, Melinda meets Andy Evans at the school hallways. She gradually starts to face what he did to her. She remembers her initial bad experience with him. Further more, he begins to annoy her in different ways. She becomes more despondent and hates school. Her academic performance becomes very poor. Guidance counselor tries to help her but she refuses to speak. Guidance counselor asks her parents to help her but she also refuses to speak. She spends many months of her painful silence and self-harm in the form of lip- and nail-biting. However, Melinda finally admits herself that Andy Evans raped her at the party last summer.

Melinda begins her way to recover by facing the fact that she was raped. The trauma of the event gradually becomes less harmful. She intends to tell her best friend Rashel because she is afraid of Andy Evans. She guesses that he intends to rape her former best friend, Rachel, too. Although Rachel does not believe her, she gains confidence after Melinda's confess. After Melinda's confess, she becomes free of her negative memories and thinks of her hobby. She returns to her art project and creates a vibrant tree. She also spends time in yard work. Melinda finds herself and reconnects with her former friends. She knows that Heather's friendship is false and she begins to rely on her former friends like Ivy. But Andy never leaves her alone; he begins to threaten her again. Andy attacks her in her janitor's closet, her safest place. At this time with confidence, she defends herself. Melinda speaks loudly with no fears. By her courage, she helps many girls who are suffered silently. Andy hurts many girls who do not speak but now he cannot hurt anyone anymore. As the school year comes to an end, Melinda gains the respect of all other girls at school. She ends the year by finishing her tree and sharing what has happened to her with her art teacher, Mr. Freeman.

7. Lost Identity

In *Speak*, Anderson focuses on the theme of identity as a central theme. Actually, issues of getting named, renamed, or nicknamed take a vital role

to support this theme since they are considered a method of self-searching. At Merry Weather school, Melinda is not the only character who searches for herself, several other characters have the same state of naming; re-naming or nicknaming. Melinda's journey starts in the bus in which she is friendless with no place to sit. She feels that all student point at her and whisper. They even deny her right of existing. Melinda finds comfort in this forced invisibility, although she can never be invisible. It is the cause that leads her to search for place to hide. One of these places is the hospital "the hospital is the perfect place to be invisible" (p.11). She tries to be hidden or un noticed because nobody can be invisible. Not only people deny her identity but she herself feels that she lost her identity, by her own pronunciation: "I am Outcast" (p.4) with a capital O.

Anderson asserts upon the idea of naming and renaming as a subtopic of self-searching and identity. Everyone's name expresses either how he sees himself or how others see him. Melinda almost gives every character in the school a nickname which matches his/her personality or some of his/her characteristics, or sometimes just seems to be fit to their functions. Besides this purpose, the nicknames used add to the comic sense in the novel and makes it interesting and reflects irony. Mr. Neck is the teacher of social studies. The English teacher is known by Hair woman who earns a new nick name at the end after having a haircut. Andy Evans is THE BEAST, or IT. We do not know the name of principal at all but Melinda calls him Principal Principal. By repeating the name, she reflects her lack of respect for him and gives the comic effect. In fact, Melinda never gives the figures of authority names as the Librarian and the Guidance Counselor. She defines all these figures, who populate her world, by their roles.

Also, Rachel, who wants to be cool and European, transforms her name to Rachele in attempt to Europeanize herself. She pretends that she speaks French so she uses this name to exchange her name and identity. In contrast, Mr. Freeman is not given a nickname. He is the teacher of Art. His name implies a lot of her feelings not only toward him but also toward the art class. She sees it as "free" space, and a place of safety. Actually, Mr. Freeman supports that feeling in her by his positive attitude.

This act of using names and renaming has a vital role in the process of searching and creating identities all over the novel. Even Melinda herself does not escape this act in different situations. One of them by her Spanish teacher who calls her "No, Melinda no eslinda" (p.41). The name that stands-up comic cracks and students call her no-linda (no-pretty) for the rest of the period. Melinda describes it as "kind of harmless fun" (p.41).

Another name of Melinda is “Outcast” as she calls herself.

Melinda, who asserts that she never intends to make trouble, broke up her friend’s summer party before ninth grade. She explains latter her cause of breaking the party that she does not know what to do after being raped. The action is misunderstood and turns her to an “Outcast” as any outcast protagonists in young adult literature. She does not seem to fit in with any crowd for breaking her friends’ party.

Melinda narrates the details of that night to express her feeling of loneliness and lost in a realistic description. She walks home and finds nobody. Melinda says that her parents are not there and both their cars are not there too. This hint refers to one of the greatest ambiguities of the novel; it refers to the home dynamics of Melinda’s family but it is never mentioned again. By this hint, readers believe that they are not only out, but they go separately. Melinda never says that they are on the edge of divorce although their image is not the picture-perfect of loving or functional family. Melinda guesses that they would be divorced if she was not born. Her way of thinking is common in young adult to express their feeling about their parents’ trouble relation. Melinda also thinks and indicates this: she is “an ordinary drone dressed in secrets and lies” (p. 70).

In Melinda’s narration, she never asks where their parents are to suggest two different interpretations; one of them is her careless about them and their existence. The second reflects that they are always separated and this behavior is usual. This kind of parents never cares about their kids’ inner feelings. They may care about the material needs of their kids but never care about their feelings. Melinda says that they buy her paints for Christmas but they never notice her interest in drawing. They never witness her trauma. By her perfect usage of words, she expresses clearly her state as an “Outcast” even in her home. She spends the night of the rape alone.

At school, the only one who talks to Melinda is Heather, the new girl. In the bleachers at the pep rally where Heather begins to introduce Melinda to other who already know her, one of the girls pushes and digs her knees into Melinda’s back. The girl tells Melinda that her brother gets arrested and loses his job because of her unaccepted act. At this point, Melinda’s real reason of calling the cops is unknown but readers like her and sympathy with her. Melinda remembers what has happened and Heather notices that her friend is unwanted. All students ignore her. Nobody pays attention to Melinda; she becomes invisible as she expresses.

8. Identity Quest

Bell hooks (1990) declares that a movement toward identity is one that allows the individual “to become—to make oneself anew” (p. 15). To become, one must move from object to subject, and this “process emerges as one comes to understand how structures of domination work in one’s life, as one develops critical thinking and critical consciousness, as one invents new, alternative habits of being, and resists from that marginal space of difference inwardly defined” (Ibid, p. 15). One’s knowledge and truth about the world are developing and are based on continuous inquiry and genuine explorations of his or her own realities. Therefore, people, especially young people, need to interact with role models in reality and through fiction to appreciate their own cultures and be exposed to and allowed to bring into the classroom their own languages and cultures to assert themselves in this ever changing and complex world. This assertion helps to move them from object to subject, from invisible to visible, and from unspoken to spoken.

Melina shares the reader her inability to be like her old friend Nicole who has a full-length locker in a discreet, fresh-smelling alcove because she is on the soccer team:

She doesn’t mind changing her clothes in public. She even changes bras, wearing one sports bra to regular class and another to gym class. Never blushes or turns around to hide herself, just changes her clothes. Must be a jock thing. If you’re that strong, you don’t care if people make comments about your boobs or rear end. (p.18)

Melinda’s isolation is self-imposed; she intentionally withdraws from people. This has its benefits. She really needs time to process her experience and come to her own conclusions about it. But she also needs the support of friends and family in order to heal. One great thing about *Speak* is that Melinda recognizes that her isolation is harmful and takes steps to reconnect with others.

I need a new friend. I need a friend, period. Not a true friend, nothing close or share clothes or sleepover giggle giggle yak yak. Just a pseudo-friend, disposable friend. Friend as accessory. Just so I don’t feel and look so stupid.(p.22)

This time Melinda fights back, refuses to be silent or alone. She begins to feel that she wants to speak. She speaks for many disenfranchised teenagers while demonstrating the importance of speaking up for oneself. She begins to talk to herself:

I know my head isn’t screwed on straight. I want to leave, transfer, warp myself to another galaxy. I want to confess everything, hand over the guilt

and mistake and anger to someone else. There is a beast in my gut, I can hear its craping away at the inside of my ribs. Even if I dump the memory, it will stay with me, staining me. My closet is a good thing, a quiet place that helps me hold these thoughts inside my head where no one can hear them.(p.51)

These lines allow readers to identify Melinda's suffering. Lisa Detora (2006) considers *Speak* a coming-of-age novel, telling Melinda's "quest to claim a voice and identity". But, according to Chris McGee (2009), Melinda is more than a victim. Melinda gains power from being silent as much as speaking. McGee considers *Speak* a confessional narrative; adults in Melinda's life constantly demand a "confession" from her. At this stage, Mr. Freeman plays a vital role. By his first words:

"SOUL," he writes on the board. The clay streaks the word like dried blood. "This is where you can find your soul, if you dare. Where you can touch that part of you that you've never dared look at before. Do not come here and ask me to show you how to draw a face. Ask me to help you find the wind." (p.10)

By these words he touches Melina's pains. He talks about the soul and feelings and teaches them how to depend on themselves but they can also ask for help. That is exactly what she seeks for. In the following conversation, Melina begins to gain the power from her art teacher who always helps his student to express themselves:

Me:"All right, but you said we had to put emotion into our art. I don't know what that means. I don't know what I'm supposed to feel." My fingers fly up and cover my mouth. What am I doing?

Mr. Freeman: "Art without emotion is like chocolate cake without sugar. It makes you gag." He sticks his finger down his throat. "The next time you work on your trees, don't think about trees. Think about love, or hate, or joy, or rage— whatever makes you feel something, makes your palms sweat or your toes curl. Focus on that feeling. When people don't express themselves, they die one piece at a time. You'd be shocked at how many adults are really dead inside—walking through their days with no idea who they are, just waiting for a heart attack or cancer or a Mack truck to come along and finish the job. It's the saddest thing I know."(p.121)

Then he gives her a ride and says "If you ever need to talk, you know where to find me. Melinda, you're a good kid. I think you have a lot to say. I'd like to hear it"(p.122). Although she never speaks, she begins to recollect her pieces and have the power to the last stage where she fights

her fears.

9. Self-Reclaiming

According to Latham (2006), *Speak* is a story of recovery. The story narration has a healing and helpful effect on Melinda. It allows her to “recreate” herself. Step by step, we see Melinda’s attempt to return back. She begins to shape her identity which is reflected in her janitor’s closet, her escape place. It becomes her art gallery and her private place to sleep comfortably. Her art project not only changes her closet to be a brighter place but also changes Melinda herself and helps her to find herself again. She puts it in a lighter place to reflect hope, triumph, and resistance in her soul.

When Melinda begins to leave the ninth grade, her closet reminds her not only negative things as struggle but also positive moments as productivity in art class and her yearlong creativity. Melinda intends to make it a new and safe place “Who knows, some other kids may need a safe place to run to next year” (p. 192). She actually saves it and herself by fighting Andy in his unexpected second attack. She feels that her closet is unsafe and in danger so, she says no and fights to protect both of them: herself and the closet. The closet is under attack as Melinda, but she protects its purity. The seeds of strength grow in the face of an identity to fight for.

Anderson shows the concept of identity search in such amazing way by creating parallel and interacts with Melinda’s. Anderson gives Melinda’s janitor’s closet an identity that reflects her own. By reporting a host of such searches, she adds a lot to young adult and children’s literature. She puts her hand on the wound. She expresses every small detail as she lives and makes her reader to live the experience. Identity searches in the novel reveals how tightly wound and symmetrically plotted the novel is.

Conclusion

To answer the first question of this study, Anderson herself asserts that she is “most proud of the impact of *Speak*, because it has helped so many survivors find the courage to talk about what happened and start to heal and grow” (Kaywell& Anderson, 2008, p. 81). She is always insists on the use of “survivors” rather victims. *Speak* is clearly one such story that connects with young readers, even though it may be painful and intense. In her article, she explores the power of story, she describes the “hundreds and hundreds of letters; assigned, unassigned, blog responses, and emails” (Anderson, 2006, p. 5) that she has received regarding *Speak*, many of which are from sexual assault survivors, young people struggling with depression, youth feeling ostracized by their peers and so forth. When she

was asked why she was flooded with messages from young people who connected with her book, she realized that “It’s quite simple. In story there is magic, words wound in a spell that mysteriously connects one heart to the next” (p. 6).

To answer the second question, the researcher clarifies Anderson’s messages clearly. First, the message to teachers who have to open a much-needed dialogue with their students about traumatic issues such as sexual insult, violence, drugs and alcohol that are relevant to teens today. The second message, students must also face the reality of their problems like rape in this novel. Girls should learn about reporting the rape and coping with it in a healthy way rather than internalizing it. The third message is to parents who create conflict for the teenage characters, rather than helping to solve their problems. Anderson’s work is a direct advice for parents to be listener to their kids. The intended listener is the one who does not listen only but who show them that they will be believed whatever they tell, without judging them negatively. This listener is very helpful to get those suffered teens’ confidence back. Melinda needs and seeks for a listener in her home but their parents are not there. She hopefully finds him in school, her art teacher.

To conclude, Anderson discusses teenager’s problems in a unique way. She creates the characters with a great depict of real life. She manages to show teenagers a truthful experience to teach them how to overcome their traumatic situations in life. Also, teachers and parents can see exactly their accepted role as a role models and supporters. Isolation is one of the discussed issues in the novel. Teenagers always see isolation as the solution but Anderson shows them to what extent it is harmful. Melinda understands at the end of the novel that isolation is not the solution and she has to takes steps to reconnect with other.

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