



Literary Studies

# The Symbols of Isolation In Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*

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## ABSTRACT

This research discusses the role of symbols found in Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*. The writers apply New Criticism as the way to find the meaning from those symbols. The writers find three important symbols in the story, they are Melinda's tree painting, mirror, and Melinda's lips and mouth condition. Anderson puts those symbols in the story in order to strengthen the salvation from the isolation as the solid theme for *Speak*.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Laurie Halse Anderson's novel, entitled *Speak*, was published in 1999. In *Speak*, Anderson tells a story of a girl, Melinda Sordino, who becomes silent because of a terrifying incident. The story starts when her friends are going away from her because they think Melinda did something wrong. Later, the story goes when she dares herself to 'speak' up about what happened. Since the story tells mainly about the condition of Melinda becomes silent, it creates the curiosity about what happened toward Melinda.

Anderson, as the author, increases the quality of her story by doing something. She puts the symbols in her novel with certain intention. She uses several symbols as the hint for the readers to understand about the story. The existence of the symbol is also for strengthening one particular theme, the salvation from the isolation, to be the solid theme for the story.

One of Laurie Halse Anderson's novel, entitled *Speak*, shows this feature. As the writer, Anderson was born in Postdam, 1961. Her most noticeable work, *Speak*, was published in 1999. As it is mentioned before, symbol can be analyzed in the novel itself. One of the approaches,

New Criticism, supports this type of analysis. It

is used in this thesis to explore the symbols in the novel. It also includes the analysis of the meaning from the symbols and how it reinforces the solid theme for the story.

It is believed that *Speak*, as the object of the research, has several symbols such as Melinda's tree painting, her lips and mouth condition, and mirror. Those symbols are existed and visible but hard to be understood directly if the readers do not pay enough attention. As the prominent and important feature from the novel, those symbols will be evaluated in this thesis in order to make the symbolism in *Speak* clear and understandable for the readers.

Since it was published in 1999, *Speak*, as the object of the research, has been discussed by using several different perspectives. Thus, the writer has also reviewed several researches from other writers. As the first related study, there is an article written by Septiani and Najma entitled *Society's Contribution to Silent Tendency of Sexually Assulted Child as Reflected in Laurie Halse Anderson's Speak* (2017). This article shows the reflection of social problem in America around 1999. Specifically, it is about the silent tendency of sexual assaulted is influenced by society. This has a good and positive thing for the readers, it is because the writer can see the connection between fiction and the society.

By relating a literary work with the society, the readers must aware of the function of literature. A literary work also gives alternative solution for our problem in society.

The second related studies comes from Sandamali (2015) entitled "Symbolism in Ernest Hemingway's The Old Man and The Sea". This article depicts the function of the symbolism in the novel. It also shows how Hemingway uses symbols in his novel, he uses it as the thing that makes his novel even better. From this article, the helpful part is in the theoretical part. In that part, Sandamali puts more than one theorist as the guidance in order to analyze a work with symbolism. This article makes a good analysis because Sandamali can define a symbol from the story and explain the symbol's meaning. In this article, she finds the symbols in type of person or characters and in type of the object.

The third related study comes from a thesis written by Widya Agustin (2016) from English Department Faculty of Humanities of Andalas University. Her thesis entitled *Reduction of Young Adult Sexual Violence as Reflects in Laurie Halse Anderson's Speak* and it is written in 2016. This thesis discusses about the way to reduce the sexual violence. Widya finds how Melinda, as the main character in this novel, is capable to eliminate the next possibility of the sexual violence to happen. While for Anderson, her novel makes the contribution in the real life. It becomes a part of curriculum in many schools in USA for the teaching material. This thesis gives the readers something important, since this novel is realistic fiction so there must be a correlation between this novel and the writer. Widya can prove it in the way how the main character's action and the achievement the writer has achieved. The analysis of this thesis is the best point, Widya answers the research question and she puts the answer in the analysis, the answers are based on the story and also based on the information about the writer in the real life. Thus, the readers will gain more knowledge about the topic she discusses in the thesis and the positive points from Speak.

So the writers are definite using symbol to deeply analyze data. Simply defined, a literary symbol is a word, a character, an object, or an event with a range of references beyond its literal meaning. It can be a word, a group of words, or an expression carrying a meaning or a set of related meanings (Neimneh, 2017).

## II. METHODS

In order to collect the data, the writers applies Library research method; read more and deep the primary source. As the secondary data, the writers gather information particularly more journal articles and book that relate to the symbolism topic. In analyzing the data, the writers start by reading the novel first to find the symbols of the novel. After the symbols are found, those symbols are analyzed. The analysis continues by seeing how the symbols strengthen the theme. The writers apply the objective or intrinsic approach as the grand theory, then the New Criticism is used in analyzing the data. In presenting the result of analysis, the qualitative method is used in this thesis. The analysis is in the descriptive or the result is presented in type of words rather than numbers (Bogda & Bilker, 2007).

In this research, the objective approach is used as the basic approach. This approach, based on Abrams's in his book *The Mirror and The Lamp*, identifies the function of intrinsic elements from literary work, there is no intrusion from any external elements. Objective approach connects with all the elements from inside, the whole parts of a literary work's intrinsic elements builds the structure of its own self (Abrams, 1953). It can be said there is an integration between the literary work with its own elements from inside, this integration makes a literary work 'distinguish' their identity from any external elements. As it happens, we can analyze a literary work from their own elements or intrinsic elements.

## NEW CRITICISM

In specific way, this research applies New Criticism. New criticism focuses only on the text itself as the way to find the meaning from a literary work. The new critics are influenced by Matthew Arnold who regards literature highly which also known as *close reading*. They regard literature as an autonomous object existing for its own sake (Christensen, 2022). According to New Criticism, the poet or the writer is an organizer of the content of human experience and their main concern is to achieve meaning through the various and sometimes conflicting elements operating in the literary work itself (Hans, 2001). Tyson says the point in using New Criticism is to gain more our focus in reading a literary work, as the assistance for our analysis, there are formal elements from the text itself (Tyson, 2006). These formal elements are images, symbols, metaphor,

rhyme, point of view, setting, characterization, plot, and more (Tyson, 2006).

## SYMBOLISM

From Rene Wellek and Austin Warren's book *Theory of Literature*, it is told a symbol is something that continuously occurs in a work (1956). So then, we may define a symbol in a literary work based on the occurrence, especially when it occurs consistently. The writers also use *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols* written by Michael Ferber (2001) rather than on 'universal' psychological archetypes or myths. It explains and illustrates the literary symbols that we frequently encounter (such as swan, rose, moon, gold. From the dictionary, we get a preliminary meaning of a symbol. Thus, we continue to explain the meaning of a symbol. Furthermore, symbols stands for different interpretations and meanings. And also these meanings get different directions, because many theorists have given their contribution for the evolution of in various domains with their views and theories (Dhain, 2015). Then, in this sense, a symbol is viewed as having values different from those of whatever is being symbolized (Septiani & Najma, 2017). There are various reasons why writers choose to use symbolism in their writing. Symbolism is used sometimes to add more depth or values to what the writers want to say.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this part, the writers analyze the symbols found in *Speak* and all of the symbols appear in type of the object. Those symbols are selected in order to find the prominent and the important symbols for the story. The writers decide to choose three symbols as for the analysis, Melinda's tree painting, mirror, and Melinda's lips and mouth condition. Those three symbols have a big impact toward the story. Thus, they become the prominent and the important symbols. Then, the characters in the play or novel find themselves in an unending despair; their dialogues which include uncompleted speeches, contradictions, and repetitions sometimes appear uncertain and meaningless although one may find deep philosophical ideas in them (Toksöz, 2017).

Tree, as the first the symbol, is the most important symbol in the story. It occurs so many times in the story, mostly it comes from Melinda's activity in painting this tree for her project in the art class. Tree itself has a meaning. Michael Ferber, in *A*

*Dictionary of Literary Symbols*, states tree may stand for a person, a country, or a cultural tradition in a story because tree presents everything that grows and dies (Ferber, 2001) rather than on 'universal' psychological archetypes or myths. It explains and illustrates the literary symbols that we frequently encounter (such as swan, rose, moon, gold. It means a tree may present a character in the literary work. The writer argues Melinda paints a tree in her project as the presentation of herself.

This symbol emerges when Melinda got it as the object for her project in the art class. At first, Melinda seems confident with it by saying "Tree? It's too easy. I learned how to draw a tree in second grade" (Anderson, 1999). Here, Melinda think she is fine. The truth is different from what she thought. She deals with a problem yet she is comfortable with it. The quotation shows, she does not fight against it. Later, Melinda is getting hard time to make a decent tree.

This symbol also appears at the time when she still cannot handle to paint a decent tree as Melinda says "But when I try to carve it, it looks like a dead tree, toothpick's, a child's drawing. I can't bring it to life. I'd love to give it up. Quit. But I can't think of anything else to do, so I keep chipping away at it" (Anderson, 1999). The dead tree, from Melinda's painting in the quotation above, means Melinda is broken. The context of broken here is her condition, she does not have an actual friend who supports her in her bad days. Her parents are busy with their work while Melinda has a serious problem. If she wants to paint a decent tree, she should find the solution for her problem.

As the story runs, Melinda makes some positive progresses in her painting. Her progress can be seen in these sentences "I try to connect the branch to a tree. It looks pretty good, better than anything I have drawn so far in art" (Anderson, 1999). In this part, Melinda tries to find what can she do in order to solve his problem. Then, She finally understands her problems as the story runs. It can be seen in this quotation "What is wrong with my tree? He overflows with words describing how bad it sucks. It's stiff, unnatural, it doesn't flow. it is an insult to tress everywhere. I agree. My tree is hopeless".

Thus, it is acceptable to say the tree in Melinda's painting is an important symbol. It becomes important because the tree in her painting stands for herself. The dynamic of her sketch of tree presents the dynamic of herself. The depiction when

Melinda cannot paint a decent tree presents the hard time when she deals with her problem. It also the same when she finally paints a better version of tree, it shows she finally finds the solution for her problem.

As the second symbol, Mirror is the crucial and important symbol in the story. It occurs several times in the story. Michael Ferber, in *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*, states Mirror shows the visualization of the truth if it is barely seen in the story (Ferber, 2001) rather than on 'universal' psychological archetypes or myths. It explains and illustrates the literary symbols that we frequently encounter (such as swan, rose, moon, gold. From this symbol, Melinda sees what happens in herself. So then, she tries to find the solution for the problem she is facing in the story.

The first appearance of this symbol is in the beginning story. As Melinda says "I watch myself in the mirror across the room. Ugh. My hair is completely hidden under the comforter. I look for the shapes in my face" (Anderson, 1999). The writer argues she does not complaint about what she sees in the mirror. She complaints about the truth she is facing at that time. In the mirror, she sees her unwell face in the mirror. The truth is, Melinda herself is not in the good condition.

It appears again in the middle part of the story. this appears when Melinda is in Heather's house, as Melinda says "I look at her mother's eyes watching me in the rearview mirror and hide my mouth with my fingers. The scabs on my lips are especially gross in that rectangle mirror" (Anderson, 1999). This shows Melinda tries to hide her scars from the others, at that time she tries to hide it from Heather's mother. This also means something more, the writer argues Melinda wants the others do not know the problem she has.

Thus, Mirror is also important symbol. Through what Melinda sees in the mirror, there is the depiction of the actual condition in the story while the readers are not aware of it. The readers may see how Melinda deals with her problem. The readers may also see how Mr. Freeman and Ivy encourage Melinda to find the solution for her problem from this mirror. Thus, mirror has the significant role in the story.

As the last symbols, Melinda's lips and mouth condition is also important symbol in the story. It occurs several times in the story and it occurs

more than the occurrence of the mirror. From this symbol, the writer argues this symbol depicts the inability of Melinda to speak. In the story, Melinda does something toward her lips and her mouth but it has the bad effect for her lips and mouth. Thus, the writer analyzes the appearance of Melinda's lips and mouth in the story as the way to prove Melinda's inability to speak until she lets go of her inability to speak.

In the story, Melinda bites her lips frequently. She bites her lips when she sees the reflection of herself in the mirror. It appears in the exposition part, as she says "I can't stop biting my lips" (Anderson, 1999). She bites her lips as the only way to respond after seeing her reflection in the mirror. She does not say a word and she even puts the mirror down. The inability to speak of Melinda here is severe. This is severe because she only deals with herself in this situation but she does not respond about the confusion she has. She does not say anything at all toward herself in order to motivate her or to make her aware of this problem.

Based on this symbol also, the writers argue there are some progresses of Melinda to let go her inability to speak. It can be seen in this quotation below:

*Heather: You want something richer, like an eggplant, or cobalt?*

*Me: No, I haven't decided on colors yet. That's not what I mean, I mean no, I won't help you.*

*She collapses into the chair again. "You have to help me"*

*Me: No, I don't*

*Heather: But, whiii—iiiiy?*

*I bite my lip. Does she want to know the truth, that she's self-centered and cold?" [1].*

In this condition, Melinda bites her lips but it is not for restraining her lips to speak. She does it in order to encourage herself to be brave, so she can speak and refuse Heather. This condition shows the progress of Melinda in order to heal her inability to speak. It happens after Melinda gets many encouragements from Mr. Freeman and Ivy, the writer explains those encouragements in the analysis of Melinda's tree painting symbol. After those encouragements, Melinda escapes from her inability to speak and it is proven by the quotation above.

The writers also analyze Melinda's mouth condition since this symbol also shows her inability to speak

significantly. There are two important appearances of this symbol in showing this inability to speak. The first occurrence is in the complication part, as Melinda says “I look at her mother’s eyes watching me in the rearview mirror and hide my mouth with my fingers” (Anderson, 1999). The writers explain this situation before in the analysis of the mirror. Here, Melinda sees the reflection of the truth and she tries to hide it as well. This situation also means something else. Based on her action, the writer argues Melinda does not want to speak. By covering her mouth, she does not want to let her mouth open or free. This action creates a tendency for Melinda to be silent. Thus, she lets her inability to speak even more severe.

Thus, it is also acceptable to say Melinda’s lips and mouth condition are important symbol for the story. It shows the inability to speak in Melinda as mostly Melinda stays silent in the story. From the story, Melinda’s lips and mouth are injured. Even though the readers may think that it just the ordinary injures, but that is the evidence of Melinda’s inability to speak. So then, this symbol is actually important to the story.

After the three important symbols are analyzed above, those symbols must have a specific role in the story. In *Speak*, the writer argues those symbols support the salvation from the isolation to be the solid theme. All of those symbols significantly show their assistance toward this theme. The tree in Melinda’s painting shows the isolation she has. Later, this symbol also shows Melinda’s struggle to overcome the isolation. Mirror, as the second symbol, helps the readers to see the isolation in Melinda since it cannot be seen directly. Mirror also helps Melinda to recognize the isolation inside her or the current state of her, thus she tries to find a way to escape from it. As the last symbol, Melinda’s lips and mouth condition depict the effect of the isolation in Melinda. That is, the inability to speak in Melinda.

Since the writer argues the theme of isolation is the solid theme for the novel, there must be some reasons. This is because this theme consistently occurs in the story. Isolation, based on Merriam-Webster.com, is the state of being separate. Someone, who is trapped in the isolation, is separated from her friends or her society. She is separated with two possible causes, either she is rejected from her society or she chose to run away

from her society or her friends. Later, this condition creates a situation where she is alone. The issue of isolation appears in the beginning of the story, it shows how Melinda can be trapped in the isolation. It forces Melinda to be silent as it is shown mostly in the story. The theme of isolation continuously appears after the beginning in order to depict how Melinda deals with the isolation. In the story, the readers find how Melinda rescues herself from the isolation. The readers find a particular time when she escapes from Andy’s second rape attempt as the most noticeable evidence of how Melinda escape from the isolation.

The symbol of tree in Melinda’s painting shows the isolation Melinda has in the story. One of the appearance of this symbol shows the theme of isolation is in this quotation “But when I try to carve it, it looks like a dead tree, toothpicks, a child’s drawing. I can’t bring it to life” (78). This shows how Melinda deals with the isolation. The dead tree there means her own self, she is broken there because she is alone and she does not have a friend. She is trapped in the isolation because of that condition. By saying she can not bring the tree to life, she is definitely having a horrible time while she is trapped in the isolation.

Another symbol, the mirror, also makes the theme of isolation solid in the story. Mirror, as the symbols, shows the truth even though Melinda is not aware of it. The readers may see the isolation in Melinda, it can be seen from what Melinda sees inside the mirror. One of the mirror’s reflection of Melinda occurs in the exposition part, after seeing her reflection in the mirror she says this “It looks like my mouth belongs to someone else, someone I don’t even know” (17). This sentence shows the truth or what happens with her. She is trapped in the isolation and it makes her barely knows her own self.

From her lips and mouth condition symbol, the readers may see her inability to speak. It can be seen from this quotation “Rachelle’s mouth moves and her hand glides over the board, drawing funny shapes and numbers. I pull my lower lip all the way in between my teeth” (39). From the quotation above, Melinda gets a question from Mr. Freeman and Rachel helps her because she cannot answer it. Melinda’s respond shows she cannot speak because she hardly gets a chance to interact with her friends because her old friends are going away from her.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

The writers conclude the meaning of symbols found in Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*. The symbols are Melinda's tree painting, mirror, and Melinda's lips and mouth condition. They are important because their appearances are consistent in the novel. Those three symbols are used by Anderson to strengthen the salvation from the isolation to be the solid theme.

The writers also conclude the role of the symbols by using new criticism. The three Important symbols in Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*, Melinda's tree painting, mirror, and Melinda's lips and mouth condition, make the salvation from the isolation to be the solid theme. The writer argues Anderson, as the author, cleverly uses those symbols as the way to show the salvation from the isolation as the solid theme in her novel. It can be seen from the analysis of the meaning of the symbols.

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