

## **Beyond the Words: Finding Voice Through the Art of Drawing Trees in Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak***

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**DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59136/lv.2026.26.1.9>**

### *Abstract*

*The strong bond between human life and the world of Nature has been explored perennially by literary artists and wordsmiths. While a traumatic experience like rape can be harrowing, the epiphany attained by a creative journey through Nature is equally rewarding. Laurie Halse Anderson powerfully uses this trope in her novel, Speak. While the immovable nature of the trees indicates the lingering effect of the trauma, their firm rootedness suggests the strength to hold the entire tree in its place and overcome any adverse weather. The silent trees become the mouthpiece for Melinda, the protagonist of the novel, to speak about her trauma. This paper aims to study the revival of the lost communication not through words but through the subject of Melinda's drawing, trees. This paper uses art therapy approach to examine the importance of looking beyond words to heal from trauma resulting from rape.*

**Keywords:** rape, trauma, silence, trees, art therapy, healing

### **Introduction**

“When people don’t express themselves, they die one piece at a time,” says Mr Freeman, Melinda’s art teacher, in Laurie Halse Anderson’s novel *Speak* (Anderson 122). This novel is a recovery as well as a resistance narrative of the protagonist, Melinda Sordino, a rape victim who fails to express her feelings initially and finally speaks out, not vocally, but through her artwork. As Mr Freeman once says, “fear is a great place to begin art” (Anderson 31), Melinda’s fear of being disbelieved by others attracts her towards art. “Artwork is a visual documentation of thoughts and feelings,” and it helps to gain “self-awareness,” and “self-control over emotions;” it boosts “self-esteem” and increases “personal growth” (Guzman). Art has a psychotherapeutic approach, and a person can use art as a medium of expressing emotions that are causing her anxiety and depression (Guzman). Art, here drawing of trees, works as a recovery tool for Melinda: “By offering a proliferation of meanings and contexts, art, for Melinda, gives voice to her fears, hopes, and concerns, and succeeds where words, parents, friends, and principals have failed” (Snider 306). Drawing allows her to communicate feelings, thoughts, problems, and hopes in a “relatively non-threatening manner” (Buchalter, *Art Therapy* 31). In *Speak*, the tree suggests trauma as well as recovery from it. While its immovable nature indicates the lingering effect of trauma, its firm rootedness suggests its strength to overcome adverse weather. Curran states that “[r]ape does worse than undermine a woman’s identity; it can rob her of her

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**Article History:** Full Article Received on 1 June 2025. Peer Review completed on 25th June 2025, Article accepted on 10 July, 2025. First published: March 2026. **Copyright** vests with Author. **Licensing:** Distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

humanity. Change from human to non-human is a constant occurrence in the *Metamorphoses*” (Curran 229). Curran also expresses that the transformation into a non-human existence indicates the fact that “the process of dehumanization begins long before any subsequent metamorphosis of the woman’s body” (Curran 229). The relationship between trees, rape, transformation and silence is not new, and it has been explored in many literary works. Be it Ovid’s Philomela in *Metamorphoses* or Shakespeare’s Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus*, the forest is the setting of their rape, and it is followed by their silence. However, Anderson also uses this trope in her novel *Speak* and it is worth noting that when Melinda first discloses her rape, she mentions “some guy raped me. Under the trees” (Anderson 183). Her rape takes place in “the woods,” and she escapes from the spot through “a forest” without telling anyone anything (Anderson 134, 136). Anderson divides the novel into four parts, and each part signifies a separate season, marking Nature’s seasonal changes as well as Melinda’s progress from her traumatic state.

Scholars have explored this novel from various perspectives, but no one has elaborated upon how the drawing of trees ultimately becomes the surviving tool for Melinda. According to O’Quinn, “forced silencing transacted into a self-determined, creative silence becomes an ally for Melinda rather than an adversary” (O’Quinn 55). Alsup points out the relevance of *Speak* in assisting “adolescents in coping with their tumultuous lives” (Alsup 159). Detora shows the inner struggle of Melinda, the “double bind of open secrecy, the necessity to at once speak and remain silent” (Detora 26). Latham mentions how Melinda uses an old janitor’s closet “as her own secret hiding place,” which helps her in coping (Latham 372). McGee also depicts the confusion between voice and voicelessness in achieving empowerment for a traumatic victim (McGee 176). Though Tannert-Smith hints at the communication power of art by saying how Melinda expresses her pain “through the creation of nonlinguistic artworks,” she does not elaborate on it (Tannert-Smith 399). Schiffman portrays the struggle of Melinda in searching for her identity, and how she also gives a new identity to the old janitor’s closet by turning it “into a lighter and brighter space of hope, triumph, and resistance” (Schiffman 54). Hussein discusses how the absence of supportive parents and a compassionate listener casts Melinda into a self-imposed isolation (Hussein 2910). Ahmed and Mohammed describe this novel as a recovery narrative through the lens of contemporary trauma theory, which does not consider “verbal testimony” as the “only curative model” as proposed by the traditional trauma theorists (Ahmed and Mohammed 87). Oetomo and Saraswati show Melinda’s struggle to overcome sexual abuse trauma through the analysis of “characterization, plot, setting and symbolism” (Oetomo and Saraswati 39). Though they explore the importance of the seasonal cycle and the relevance of the tree symbol in Melinda’s struggle, they do not explore how Melinda’s drawing of trees develops with the progress of the seasonal cycle and assists her in healing slowly. Taking clues from these previous works, this paper tries to fill the research gap by focusing on Melinda’s healing journey with the help of art, which goes hand in hand with the progress of seasonal changes.

### **Silence and Finding Voice: Melinda’s Healing Journey**

Melinda Sordino, the protagonist of the novel, is raped at a summer party a few weeks before her first day at high school by an older boy, Andy Evans. She called the police but could not say anything over the phone, and left the place without telling anyone anything. Because of her police call, the party was spoilt, and her friends broke contact with her. Melinda starts her high school

as an outcast. “The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma,” and this inner conflict gives rise to the symptoms that “call attention to the existence of an unspeakable secret and deflect attention from it” (Herman). Melinda chooses to remain silent because she finds no suitable listener: “Melinda is suffering in silence not because she cannot relate her story but because she fears to be disbelieved by her peers, school administrators, and her family” (Ahmed and Mohammed 82). Melinda murmurs, “They want me to speak,” but “Would you listen? Would you believe me? Fat chance” (Anderson 113-114). It is her conscious choice to remain silent and a strategy to cope with trauma.

The most prevalent symbol in this novel, the tree, is the ultimate survival tool to overcome Melinda’s trauma. Melinda and the tree become one in their struggle to overcome hardships. Melinda’s struggle has been discussed, taking the seasonal cycle into account. She is able to overcome fear and shame by transforming her post-traumatic symptoms into something creative through the art of drawing trees. Art is “a symbolic language” which is not “speech based” (Snider 306), and “its atemporal character condenses the intensity of pain in the present, the possible explanations for it in the past, and the potential transformation for the future,” thus helping in “the transmission of certain aspects of pain and trauma that cannot as easily be expressed in words” (Marxen 239).

Melinda’s high school starts almost at the beginning of September, indicating the arrival of *autumn*. When she is introduced to the art class, Mr Freeman, the art teacher, hints at the curative power of art: “Welcome to the only class that will teach you how to survive” (Anderson 10). Melinda gets “Tree” as her task, but her drawings look “nearly dead” and “hopeless” (Anderson 30-32), mirroring Melinda’s inner turmoil. Though trees are mute like her, “the unspeaking tree offers a unique and penetrating pictorial articulation of the tension between one’s pain and its perception and expression by others” (Zamir, “Wooden Subjects” 277). Drawing of trees becomes the vehicle to express her “unconscious as well as conscious issues and beliefs” and provides her with the freedom to represent her “inner and outer world” (Buchalter, *Art Therapy* 31).

During winter, a tree has to stand firmly against strong wind and snow. To Melinda, snow symbolises “cold and silence,” and she wishes for a snowy day because “once the snow covers the ground, it hushes as still as” her heart (Anderson 130). During this period, every drawing she has made looks “flat,” “cheap,” and “cruddy” (Anderson 55). Though she visualises a strong Oak tree with a “wide scarred trunk and thousands of leaves reaching to the sun,” she cannot give it a shape (Anderson 78). The two trees she made at the end of this season signal her improvement. Mr Freeman advises her to think about “love, or hate, or joy, or rage,” or whatever makes her feel something at the time of drawing (Anderson 122). Eva Marxen mentions how “[o]ver the centuries, pain and suffering have always been expressed in art” (Marxen 239). Melinda puts a Barbie head “on top of the bony carcass” of the turkey she brought from home, and sets knives and forks to look like legs, and places “a piece of tape over Barbie’s mouth” (Anderson 64). This nonverbal artwork, giving shape to Melinda’s sufferings, speaks on behalf of her.

Buchalter mentions the worry tree, used in art therapy, where patients are asked to draw a tree using “a combination of symbols, figures, words and shapes to represent their worries and concerns” at the place of leaves (Buchalter, *Art Therapy* 85). The last tree that Melinda draws in winter is a significant piece of art with “hundreds of skinny rectangles for branches,” which look like “lockers, boxes, glass shards, lips with triangle brown leaves” (Anderson 119). Where lockers and boxes represent her repressed feelings, which she has locked inside, glass shards

indicate her emotional wound as painful as a wound inflicted by a shard of glass. Her inability to verbally express her sufferings is represented by “lips with triangle brown leaves.”

In spring, Melinda is able to bloom a little, and it “symbolizes Melinda’s awakening” (Oetomo and Saraswati 45). Mr Freeman advises to breathe life into her trees to make them real like: “Make it bend – trees are flexible, so they don’t snap. Scar it, give it a twisted branch – perfect trees don’t exist. Nothing is perfect. Flaws are interesting. Be the tree” (Anderson 153). Instead of judging the aesthetic merits and demerits of the artwork, art therapy gives importance to the involvement in making it (Malchiodi 1). Through drawing of trees, Melinda learns to gain confidence and warns other girls by writing on the toilet wall, “Guys to Stay Away From. . . . Andy Evans” (Anderson 175). Her message is followed by many responses from other girls who kept their mouths shut against his misdeed. This act empowers Melinda and makes her feel like she can fly (Anderson 186), and gives her the impetus to fight Andy Evans when he attacks her again. She exposes her rapist by screaming “NNNOOO” loudly (Anderson 194), threatens him by placing a shard of glass against his throat and outs him from her life.

Before the summer vacation, Melinda stays late at her art class “for one last try at getting” her “tree right” (Anderson 196). Though her drawing is not perfect, this imperfection makes the tree realistic and full of life: “My tree is definitely breathing; little shallow breaths like it just shot up through the ground this morning” (Anderson 196). This tree has roots, and the crown part looks “tall and healthy,” and it “reaches for the sun” (Anderson 196). Though it has a sick lower branch, the tree will not allow it to kill the “whole thing” and let it drop soon to survive (Anderson 196). Similarly, she accepts that she is raped and does not want to run away from this reality anymore. She knows she can grow and does not let the trauma caused by other’s faults kill her. She is now free from shame and guilt, and marks this freedom by adding birds to her drawing.

Melinda’s “speech through art, through creating trees, brings healing, not judgment, punishment, or forgiveness. Learning to manipulate her creativity is like learning to speak an entirely new language for Melinda” (Snider 304). Her artistic language allows her to reconcile her inner and outer worlds: “Art is a symbolic language that taps into the unconscious” (Guzman). At the end of the novel, there is a hint at her speaking of her traumatic past to Mr Freeman verbally. With the advent of the summer, as the trees break free from their frozen state, “the last block of ice” in Melinda’s throat and her “frozen stillness” also melt down and words that were submerged for a long period “float up” (Anderson 197).

## Conclusion

Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is fraught with women’s rape, the subsequent silence and transformation. Jessi Snider proclaims that “[g]rounded in Ovidian imagery, Speak has the appeal of an updated adaptation of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: a girl is raped by the high school equivalent of a god. She changes from typical adolescent to a withdrawn teen suffering from selective mutism” (Snider 300). When the readers are first introduced to the day of Melinda’s rape, they can notice that she describes Andy Evans as a “Greek God” (Anderson 134). In classical mythology, there are many references to rape by gods. Apollo’s attempted rape of Daphne turns her into a laurel tree (March 113). Pitys has transformed herself into a pine tree to avoid Pan’s advances (March 582). Acantha, is transformed into an acanthus plant to stay away from Apollo’s rape, and Leuce, abducted by Hades, becomes a poplar tree after her death (Snider 302).

However, unlike the female victims in classical mythology, who spend the rest of their lives in a

dehumanised state, Anderson presents “a second metamorphosis” of her protagonist by allowing her to “transcend her trauma through art” (Snider 300). By creating many drawings of trees, she turns the old janitor’s closet into her own forest. Being stuck in this forest, she could become a tree like Daphne and Pitys and speechless like Philomela and Lavinia. However, she surpasses them and leaves behind her self-created forest by exiting the closet, finally breaking free from her trauma by not becoming a tree herself.

It is remarkable that the tree imagery has been used for the treatment of children affected by HIV/AIDS in Southern Africa by applying the “Tree of Life” methodology, which was developed by a joint partnership between Ncazelo Ncube and David Denborough. Later, it became popular and spread worldwide, and it is used to treat children and adults who have gone through tough times. This programme asks clients to imagine themselves as trees and describe “their lives within the tree metaphor” (Read 8). This approach involves four steps, the first of which is drawing trees. Different parts of these trees signify different meanings: the roots describe “where they come from,” the ground represents “where the person lives now,” the trunk represents “the person’s skills and strengths,” the branches represent “goals and dreams,” the leaves represent “significant people in their lives living or dead,” and the fruit represents “the gifts they have been given in life” (Read 9-10). These different parts of the trees have also been given importance in Melinda’s drawings. At the early stage of Melinda’s trauma, there are no proper roots, branches and leaves in her trees, but in her final drawing, the roots are strong enough to keep the tree firm, and the crown part that is “tall and healthy,” “reaches for the sun” (Anderson 196). One of the branches is sick, and she knows that the tree will let it drop soon. It indicates that she is ready to let go of her painful past and will start her life afresh.

When a person cannot voice her feelings, it should be understood that a breach occurs between the mind and the body. This breach results in a gap between the “intended articulation” and the “actual speech” (Zamir, “Talking Trees” 449).

One must avoid a mere instrumental understanding of vocalization. The voice is not simply used, nor does it merely express. To voice is to materialize words – mental entities – through one’s body and breath. Voice is thus embodied language, the meeting point between mind and body, private and public, between the unarticulated and the stated, between the qualitatively undefined and the pitch specific. (Zamir, “Talking Trees” 449)

In this novel, “speak” has significant meanings. It indicates not only verbal expression but “the confidence to admit about the rape and the struggle to overcome sexual abuse trauma” (Oetomo and Saraswati 46). The art of drawing trees not only helps Melinda find her lost self again but also gives the abandoned closet an identity by transforming it into “a lighter and brighter space of hope, triumph, and resistance” (Schiffman 54). She turns it into her private art gallery as her drawings of various trees occupy its shelves and walls. This place is “a reminder of her yearlong creativity, struggle, but ultimate productivity in art class” (Schiffman 54). *Art therapy* provides an individual with the opportunity to focus on her strength in a creative manner (Buchalter, *Raising Self-Esteem* 13).

Snider argues that the “transcendence of” Melinda’s “trauma takes place not in speech or the act of utterance, but in the act of creation” (Snider 304). Mr Freeman performs the role of an art therapist in Melinda’s life. Art therapy encourages “personal growth,” increases “self-understanding,” assists in “emotional reparation,” and is something through which one can find one’s soul (Malchiodi 1). In the art class, Mr Freeman also says, “This is where you can find

your soul, if you dare.” (Anderson 10). Truly indeed, taking the help of art, Melinda is able to reach her soul, palliate its sufferings, and find “relief from overwhelming emotions or trauma” (Malchiodi 1). O’Quinn suggests that “her voice is never internally stilled, even externally lost. The ensuing inner tempest is intriguing as well as telling; forced silencing transacted into a self-determined, creative silence becomes an ally for Melinda rather than an adversary” (O’Quinn 55). Artwork serves as a “compilation of feelings, problems, concerns, and solutions” (Buchalter, *Raising Self-Esteem* 16), and the creative outcome of the artwork is a way to present the thoughts and feelings in a nonverbal communication. For Melinda, the art of drawing trees becomes “a substitute for speech” and a way “to express the unsayable” (Latham 378). The unspeakable trees become the mouthpiece of Melinda to speak about her trauma.

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