

## **Stop Waiting for Melinda to Speak: Examining Rhetorical Silence in Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak***

The titular imperative verb, *Speak*, implores the protagonist, Melinda, to tell the audience her story insisting that she speak out about and against her sexual assault. Before readers meet Melinda or even crack the cover of the book, they are waiting for her to speak. While Anderson's *Speak* has certainly been the subject of extensive literary criticism that questions ideological viewpoints that surround the central issue of sexual assault, many critics see Melinda's silence as waiting. Theorists wait for the moment she speaks to imbue her actions with power, waiting nearly the entire book for Melinda to find her voice and speak out. While these critical readings of the novel are important, I hope to shift the focus away from waiting. Instead, I hope to demonstrate that applying theories of rhetorical silence can offer a way to see Melinda's silence as a powerful communicative gesture on its own. Cheryl Glenn's *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence* offers a theoretical model for examining the communicative value of both speaking and silence. Glenn writes, "Although some silences are, indeed, unproductive or passive, not all are; but whether it is a forced position or a tactical choice, it carries meaning. Silence is not, in itself, necessarily a sign of powerlessness or emptiness; it is not the same as absence; and silencing for that matter is not the same as erasing. Like the zero in mathematics, silence is an absence with a function" (263). I will argue that we should stop waiting for Melinda to speak. Instead, we need to explore Melinda's silence as "an absence with a function," realigning the reading of the imperative title and allowing a new and nuanced understanding of Melinda's power not just in the moment of vocalization but throughout the novel.