



Silenced by Sex: Hard Truths & Taboos in Teaching Literature

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Introduction

A face floats up through the leaves. First the eyes appear, green eyes with leaves for eyebrows, then the nose, and finally the . . . No. There is no mouth. Though the eyes speak volumes, the missing mouth says even more.

This is how we are first introduced to protagonist Melinda Sordino on the cover of Laurie Halse Anderson's (1999) award-winning novel, *Speak*. On her first day of high school, we quickly learn that Melinda is outcast, despised by her peers because she called the cops at a summer party and several teens were arrested. But we don't learn why she called 911 until much later in the novel, for Melinda has been silenced by sex.

The silencing of young voices, both on and off the page, because of sexual trauma and even sexual curiosity, is the focus of this piece. In *Speak*, Melinda's silence stems from the fact that she was raped at that summer party by a senior boy, and she retreats into herself refusing to share the truth of that night with anyone.

In addition to *Speak*, we will explore two other literary texts that center on sexual issues for young teens. *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This* by Jacqueline Woodson (1994) tells of a complex, cross-racial friendship between upper class, African American Marie and lower class, European American Lena. But at the heart of the story is the disclosure that Lena is being sexually abused by her father, and she asks Marie to keep the secret. Marie's revelation is the narrative of the novel. The third novel, *Silent to the Bone* by E. L. Konigsburg (2000), involves another friendship, but this time between two boys. Branwell has chosen silence over revealing the truth of his baby sister's nearly fatal accident, but his silence is not caused by another's sexual aggression. Instead, Branwell is muted by his own shame. He was too infatuated with Vivian—the au pair who actually shook the baby into unconsciousness—to speak when he should have spoken. Throughout the novel, Branwell's friend, Connor, works to break the mystery of his friend's silence, as well as to show him that being struck dumb has only temporary advantages.

Theoretical Frame

Our theoretical frame leans on Brown and Gilligan's (1992) belief that when listening to adolescents talk: "Four questions about voice attune one's ear to the harmonics of relationship:"

- Who is speaking?

- In what body?
- Telling what story about relationship—from whose perspective or from what vantage point?
- In what societal and cultural frameworks? (p. 21)

While they place voice at the center of their work, it never stands alone in a disembodied state. Instead, it comes replete with physicality, relationship, and social setting. They argue: "Voice is inherently relational—one does not require a mirror to hear oneself—yet the sounds of one's voice change in resonance depending on the relational acoustics: whether one is heard or not heard" (p. 20).

Brown and Gilligan ponder what happens to young women when they are silenced, and their concerns are echoed in other research work on gender. For example, Orenstein (1994) describes "the pattern of silence and shame . . . among girls" (p. 149) she witnessed in middle schools—girls who often harm themselves because of low self esteem. She explains, "as girls, they are disallowed the luxury of turning their anger outward; the only outlet they have for their rage is their own bodies" (p. 107). Orenstein argues that their rage is often the result of sexual harassment. Still, these very visible, yet contradictory, signs of silence, scream, and sexual aggression are repeatedly ignored in school. Lehr (2001) observes "that teachers are woefully unequipped to handle situations like this" (p. 8). And Smagorinsky and Coppock (2000) warn us of the dangers of what happens in school when teachers cannot monitor all their small group activities. In the Bahktrian (1984) sense, Lensmire (2000) argues that powerful groups—like males—turn the openness of the oft times carnivalesque aspects of classroom life to their own advantage, turning against "more powerless groups" (p. 20), especially young women.

Still, it is important to remember that young men can also be victims. They too can be caught in the "knotted dilemma" described by Gilligan, Lyons, and Hammer (1990)—trying to untie the knot of

speaking out when traditional gendered expectations, guilt, and shame convince you that keeping silent to the bone may serve as your only weapon, especially in a community that really doesn't care to listen. While many researchers are listening, per-

haps another knot in the dilemma exists in how the youth in these studies only speak through their adult interpreters. What might be the potential for errors in such translations?

In *Speak* (Anderson, 1999), Melinda Sordino tells us that one of "THE FIRST TEN LIES THEY TELL YOU IN HIGH SCHOOL

[is]"We are here to help you" (p. 5). After a catastrophic confrontation with a social studies teacher Melinda calls "Mr. Neck," she knows there is no way *he* is here to help her. She faces him in silence, but her "headvoice" says: "It is easier not to say anything. Shut your trap, button your lip, can it. All that crap you hear on TV about communication and expressing feelings is a lie. Nobody really wants to hear what you have to say" (p. 9).

However, here we will listen to three young teens: Melinda, Lena, and Branwell. Though they are all too silent, they do communicate, often through their bodies. Thus, our first section deals with Brown and Gilligan's (1992) first two questions about voice and body. We will then turn to their third question about relationship, for each of these teens does have someone in the community—a friend or a teacher—who is willing to listen. Finally, we will address their fourth question about the societal and cultural frameworks in which these teens exist. We will focus on *schools* in this final section, following the lead of Dan Hade (1997) and Kathy Short (2001), who suggest, "educators imply through their silence that injustice, stereotypes, and inequity are acceptable. By not saying anything, educators send a message that is just as loud as if they were speaking openly in the classroom" (p. 189). Teachers, too, can be silenced by sex, and it is our goal to consider the consequences of keeping our mouths shut.

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Who is Speaking? In What Body?

In *The Poisonwood Bible*, Barbara Kingsolver (1998) argues:

You can't just point to the one most terrible thing and wonder why it happened . . . Each bad thing causes something worse . . . If you look hard enough you can always see reasons, but you'll go crazy if you think it's all punishment for your sins. I see that plainly when I look at my parents. God doesn't need to punish us. He just grants us a long enough life to punish ourselves. (p. 327)

Kingsolver's quote goes straight to the heart of our first two questions: Who is speaking? In what body? Prior to her rape, Melinda described herself as "a one-piece talking girl" (Anderson, 1999, p. 97), someone who talked eagerly and often with friends. She remembers earlier days when her family visited an apple orchard, and as her Dad lifted her into a tree, she felt "it was like falling up into a storybook" (p. 66). But the seeds of discontent had already been planted. The night she stumbles home after the rape, having been unable to speak to the police, both parents are gone and they're not together. And the pattern of absence and separateness only grows.

After the rape, Melinda rarely speaks. The author makes this clear through multiple conversations written in the form of a play script—a name, a colon, and then the words spoken. But, in these "conversations" Melinda's response is consistently ME:—M, E, colon, and no words follow. Although her parents and teachers mostly ignore her, they do ultimately realize that she has stopped talking. But rather than sympathy or even curiosity about what might be standing behind the silence, they are angry. Her mother exclaims, "She won't **say** anything! I can't get a word out of her. She's mute" (p. 114).

Still, Melinda's body is saying so much. Her hair is unwashed, her face dirty, her jeans crumpled, her clothes too large—all in an attempt to shield her body. Even more obvious, she chews her lips to shreds, emblematic of the feelings that are eating her alive. Even classmates notice this. Melinda overhears one girl comment: "She's creepy. What's wrong with her lips? It looks like she's got a dis-

ease or something" (p. 45). But no one asks why.

Many of Melinda's patterns are repeated in Lena. We don't really have a sense of Lena prior to her father's abuse, but we do know that at one time—perhaps when her mother was still alive—she must have been lighter. When she first introduces herself to Marie, she gets the typical teen reaction: "Who cares." Lena shrugs, but is clear in her response: "I care. That's who" (Woodson, 1994, p. 16). And she does care. Of the characters in these three books, Lena is the clearest about who she is and how her father's abuse is not her fault. Still, discussing the details is hard. When she talks with Marie about her father's advances, she is brief and then shuts down. Marie explains, "She looked hollow, vacant as sky, and I knew she had said all she was going to say about it" (p. 79). Like Melinda, Lena's appearance is "raggedy" (p. 52), with her hair unwashed and clothes a mess. Even her gait is affected, for Marie declares: "Sometimes Lena walked like somebody broken" (p. 33).

Branwell, our third character, is broken as well—but not by abuse. Instead he is ashamed that his infatuation with the au pair has prevented him from speaking about her neglect of his baby sister. Prior to the arrival of the au pair in his home, Branwell is described as one "who loved words so much" (Konigsburg, 2000, p. 22). But when the au pair shakes the baby into an unconscious state and accuses Branwell of dropping the child, he retreats into silence. Indeed, "SILENCE," written all in capital letters, is the first word we **don't** hear from Branwell in his call to 911. The author repeats the word four times within the very short emergency call, and then has Connor, the narrator, use it once again to explain, "The SILENCES were Branwell's. He is my friend" (p. 3). And throughout the novel, Connor comes up with a variety of synonyms for his friend's silence, describing him as "struck dumb" (p. 134), "unspoken" (p. 123), and, true to the title of the book, "silent to the bone" (p. 218).

Like Melinda and Lena, Branwell's appearance is problematic. Placed in the town's Behavioral Center, awaiting news of his sister as well as whether he will be criminally charged, Connor describes Branwell as "zombielike" (p. 7). The first time he visits Branwell in the Center, "He looked awful. His hair was greasy

and uncombed, and he was so pale . . ." (p. 6).

Who is speaking? In what body? In each of these three novels, the protagonists are silent, or at least quiet about their pain, but their bodies scream out, and this is a common human pattern. Holland and Eisenhart (1992) explain: "the interpersonal signs of attractiveness are important; one gains or loses attractiveness depending on the attractiveness of those whom one attracts and the treatment that one receives from them" (p. 102). Since "rape is an ultimate form of bad treatment" (p. 101), Melinda's silence and slovenly appearance reflect her pain. Similarly, Lena puts personal hygiene at a distance as she attempts to spend shorter amounts of time in a house with a father who can always walk through the bathroom door. Finally, Branwell's zombielike appearance is explained in his shock with the au pair's betrayal as well as his shame for not speaking when he should have spoken out.

If it's true that "attractiveness is self-reinforcing . . . symbolic capital" (p. 103), these three characters are painfully demonstrating their lack of worth. Fortunately, however, though their parents are missing the signs, there is a member of each of their communities who is listening.

Telling What Story About Relationship?

About midway through the novel, *Silent to the Bone* (Konigsburg, 2000), a character named Yolanda asks, "And Branwell? Can he talk?" Connor says "Not yet. But we have a way of communicating." And Yolanda replies: "That's nice. Friends always find a way to keep in touch" (p. 171). These three novels demonstrate exactly that—friends find a way. In their work, Brown and Gilligan (1992) emphasize that rather than telling "a story about separation," they are interested in "voicing the relationships" (p. 22). Even when a character is not talking, there are other ways to be in relationship and other modes of communication. Connor, for example, writes words and the alphabet on cards

because he understands that "Branwell could speak to [him] with his eyes" (p. 26), blinking, nodding, and eventually pointing to indicate which letters and words would help Connor unlock the mystery of Branwell's silence.

Although this communicative method steadily reveals more and more of Branwell's secret, there is a point in the novel where progress is stalled. And this is true in many narratives. In analyzing fairy tales, for example, Zipes (1991) explains that there is often "a peripety or sudden fall in the protagonist's fortunes, which is generally only a temporary setback" (p. xiii). In *Silent to the Bone* (Konigsburg, 2000), Connor meets the au pair, Vivian, and succumbs somewhat to her charms. In his conversations with Branwell, he begins to tease and even use sarcasm to chide his friend about what he thinks are their parallel infatuations. But Branwell, who knows much more about Vivian, withdraws. In the shock of stepping back rather than moving forward in relationship, Connor realizes "Maybe my sarcasm led to his silence about Vivian" (p. 123).

In fairytales, Zipes (1991) argues, "A wonder or miracle is needed to reverse the wheel of fortune" (p. xiii), but in real life the miracles occur in realizations that help to reestablish relationships. Connor realizes that Branwell needs protection and understanding, not sarcasm. As he eloquently puts it: "Civilized people have to preserve rare birds" (p. 134).

In *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This* (Woodson, 1994), Lena's mode of communication is vocal, but the revelation of her secret comes in hints and questions. She asks, "You love your daddy, Marie? . . . I wish I could love mine" (p. 42). The peripety in Lena and Marie's relationship occurs not once but several times throughout the novel. When Lena finally reveals the truth about her father, Marie initially refuses to believe it. Even more catastrophic, at one point she becomes so angry that she screams at Lena: "Why do you let him? . . . You must like

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it!" Lena's reaction is immediate; she "looked as though [Marie] had hit her" (p. 81), and then she walked away. Marie quickly realizes that the pain she has caused her friend stems from her own anger. She reflects, "I realized it *wasn't* about Lena. It was him I was mad at" (p. 82).

In both *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This* and *Silent to the Bone* (Konigsburg, 2000), the protagonist in pain is in relationship with a close friend. And though their friendships have their times of crisis—with Connor's sarcasm and Marie's terrible accusation—their relationships are reestablished through reflection. The novel *Speak* (Anderson, 2000) follows a similar pattern, but the relationship Melinda has is with her art teacher. On her first day of class, her teacher—purposefully named Mr. Freeman—declares: "Welcome to the only class that will teach you how to survive . . . Welcome to Art." Though Melinda speaks only rarely, she finds a survival mode of communication through her art. She struggles with it, of course, trying again and again to construct her year's assignment, a tree. But after a particularly catastrophic Thanksgiving with her parents, she discards the tree momentarily and constructs a sculpture out of the turkey bones, inserting a knife and fork into the piece. Her *pièce de résistance* is a Barbie doll head, which she mounts atop the pile of bones and utensils—a Barbie with a piece of tape across her mouth. Mr. Freeman, who has not only noticed Melinda's struggle in class but also her struggles in life, analyzes the sculpture. Tapping his chin and making Melinda nervous, he suggests: "This has meaning. Pain" (p. 65).

Because they are not friends, the peripety is slighter in this relationship. Mr. Freeman is frustrated by Melinda's inability to infuse her art with emotion. He tells her, "Art without emotion is like chocolate cake without sugar. It makes you gag" (p. 122). But after this quick but potent lesson, he

softens the blow by saying, "I think you have a lot to say. I'd like to hear it" (p. 123). Melinda's former friends are either too angry over her 911 call or have too many of their own problems to really try to sort out why Melinda's mute. From a greater distance and with problems of his own, only Mr. Freeman stays the course.

In What Societal and Cultural Frameworks?

Turning to our last question from Brown and Gilligan (1992) we must ask: In what societal and cultural frameworks do our protagonists exist? The students in our three novels are all trying to communicate, but their voices are relatively unheard in their communities, except for the gift of two best friends. Indeed, their parents at home and their teachers at school rarely notice their plights. Melinda's teacher, Mr. Freeman, is the only adult to really take notice and try to help her to communicate her life experiences.

Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) describe school settings that in essence work to silence children. They state, "We are overwhelmed by the fragmentation that takes place as [the children] move from the hopes of their families and the promise of their early years through an educational system that gradually disconnects their lives" (p. 121). The literature presented here mirrors the reality of this disconnection.

Melinda's Merryweather High, Lena's town of Chauncey, and Branwell's Knightsbridge Middle School are all places ironically uninterested in the inner lives of their teens. Even the names are a lie. Merryweather implies sunny skies, happy-go-lucky students, smooth sailing—but we know from Melinda's story that life is anything but smooth. Lena lives in the town of Chauncey, pronounced "chancey," which implies the vicissitudes of life. And Knightsbridge signifies a place of romanticized connection, rather than the disconnection from school that Branwell and Connor often feel.

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The names that the protagonists provide tell us even more about their emotional distance from their schools and communities. Melinda, for example, tells us that her school's mascot was the Trojan, though the school board decided to crush the sexual innuendo implied by this name. Melinda explains, "Home of the Trojans didn't send a strong abstinence message, so they have transformed us into the Blue Devils. Better the Devil you know than the Trojan you don't, I guess" (Anderson, 1999, p. 4). The irony in a school board's acceptance of the Devil, but denial of the Trojan is more than a little painful.

While the girls in *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This* (Woodson, 1994) don't have a specific name for their school, Lena characterizes their town by saying, "Chauncey ain't far from nowhere" (p. 18), and the lack of community grounding is clear. Their school is there, but also nowhere, nothing more than a place to be during the day. For Branwell and Connor, school is so infantile at times they call it "DAYCARE" (Konigsburg, 2000, p. 29). And in another instance, Connor describes school as a place with "cleverly guarded halls" where a person would have difficulty moving "without diplomatic passport or bullet proof vest" (p. 111). Thus, the names and descriptions the characters ascribe are further signals of the emphasis that their schools place on constraining and restraining rather than emancipating and encouraging communication.

Emblematic of this lack of communication, the schools have little insight into our protagonists' problems, and neither does the larger community. Even when the adults in authority recognize a problem, they focus on the surface aspects rather than the core motivation. In *Speak* (Anderson, 1999), Melinda is called to a meeting of the principal, the guidance counselor, and her parents. The principal, whom Melinda nicknames "Principal Principal" begins the meeting: "We all agree we are here to help. Let's start with these grades. They are not what we expected from you,

Melissa" (p. 114). Of course, the opening offer of help aligns with Melinda's first of "ten lies they tell you in high school" (p. 5). The focus on grades as well as the fact that he calls her "Melissa" rather than her name, makes the lie all the more evident. No wonder Melinda makes no response other than her internal voice: "Me: [inside my head] Would you listen? Would you believe me? Fat chance" (p. 114).

Lena, on the other hand, knows that help from the adults in her community can often lead to personal disaster. The one time an adult did believe that her father was abusing her, it was a social service worker who pulled both Lena and her sister from their house, placing the girls in separate foster homes. Lena was desperate to get back to her sister, but as she explained, "The woman was always coming around apologizing, talking about she couldn't do anything about it 'cause there wasn't enough families out there who wanted two girls at the same time" (Woodson, 1994, p. 77). As a result, both girls ran away, but with nowhere to run, they returned to their father.

As for Branwell, he is forgotten at school. All of his problems are ignored by his teachers in the novel. No teacher stops Connor to inquire or calls Branwell's parents to see how he is. The one hint we have of the school's reaction comes when Connor tells Branwell: "We missed you at chorus rehearsal today . . . They decided to eliminate [your] solo. I'm telling you, Bran, we do a lot better when you're there" (Konigsburg, 2000, p. 135). That's certainly Connor's opinion, but the teachers seem not to miss Branwell in the least. Instead of thinking with their students about the dilemma their friend is facing, they simply eliminate his role in the school musical.

In *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This* (Woodson, 1994), *Silent to the Bone* (Konigsburg, 2000), and *Speak* (Anderson, 1999), the adult members of the community and school aren't listening, so it's little surprise that our protagonists stop talking. When Melinda realizes that she and her parents have been

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reduced to brief notes to each other about how to order the pizza for dinner, she asks in her headvoice: "What else is there to say?" (p. 14). We think there's plenty to say, but for that we will turn to our final discussion.

Discussion

In a recent review of a book on the Brothers Grimm, Zarin (2001) explained how over time Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm were challenged again and again to revise their texts. Some, with an excess of violence, were eliminated; others, tales were expurgated: "Wilhelm himself did the work, but he wrote, in some exasperation, 'You can fool yourself into thinking that what can be removed from a book can also be removed from real life'" (p. 29).

But let's not fool ourselves. True, it takes bravery to read literature with taboo subjects, literature which raises difficult topics. True, these three novels are not easy, and discussing them will, no doubt, make teachers and students uncomfortable. Bravery to confront these texts involves acknowledging the possible discomforts and pressing onward in the face of difficult obstacles. Teachers we have spoken to have said things like, "I know this book can be powerful, but I am not sure that I would read it in my classroom." Some even go so far as to say, "I would **never** use this book in school!" So our remaining question is: What holds us back from teaching something so powerful? Is it fear?

Certainly, fear of administrative and parental opposition are real and must be addressed in each individual situation. Still, we would like to make a case for taking a strong stance and teaching such literature. Knowing that unpredictable moments will arise while discussing these texts is part of the unknown territory that brave teachers take on daily.

However, if a teacher is willing to take on tough texts—especially those that deal with taboo subjects like sexuality—first a safe space must be established to begin the discussion. As Melinda shows us, safety was essential for her emancipation. She explains, "The art room is one of the places that I feel safe. I hum and don't worry about looking stupid" (p. 160). Our classrooms must be safe, but in that safety they must be places where people agree to disagree, and feel comfortable with discomfort.

Even more important, more must be read than the text itself. In essence, we must learn to read our students and offer up opportunities for our students to read one another (Macedo, 1993).

On the other hand, teachers have the right to choose which texts they will teach, and they may have important reasons **not** to teach controversial books. They may have a student in their class for whom a novel like *Speak* (Anderson, 1999) may be too close to home. And perhaps the novels are too close to their own personal experiences. Engle (1995) explains, "We love to hear and read stories that capture some emotional dilemma but give us enough distance, by virtue of the symbolic form, to experience it without being consumed by it" (p. 40). Perhaps, these three novels consume us in ways that don't offer enough distance. Yet, in making the choice **not** to teach such texts, Dressman (1997) reminds us that "choice is never completely personal, but is always political" (p. 321). Furthermore, he argues, that such choices raise "questions about how 'meeting student needs' might themselves be a sort of well-intentioned doing of hegemony along the lines of . . . gender, or other forms of differentiation" (p. 322). What are we denying students when we refuse to teach about issues that are a part of their day-to-day lives?

Even if teachers choose not to teach tough books, they would benefit from reading these texts on their own, for they offer us a view into the silenced. The outward observable signs in these silenced teens are patterns that we may see in present and future students. Reading these texts helps us to know the signs of those who are begging for help from the inside out.

In the final analysis, these three novels have critical issues to share with readers about larger life, the human condition, how to live, and how to survive. Whether our students **can** speak or **will** speak depends on the communities we create in our classrooms and the deep discussions we offer around literature. At the end of each novel, the voice of the protagonist is finally released. In *Silent to the Bone* (Konigsburg, 2000), Branwell tells Connor, "I want to tell you everything" (p. 238). In *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This* (Woodson, 1994), Marie feels that Lena has given her permission to tell the

story: "It's okay now, Marie. Go ahead and tell it" (p. 13). And in *Speak* (Anderson, 1999), Melinda's voice is released at the end of the novel:

Mr. Freeman: "You've been through a lot, haven't you?"

The tears dissolve the last block of ice in my throat. I feel the frozen stillness melt down through the inside of me, dripping shards of ice that vanish in a puddle of sunlight on the stained floor. Words float up.

ME:—"Let me tell you about it." (p. 198)

As teachers of English, we can use literature to bring deeper meaning to students' lives. These three novels offer unique opportunities to help students use their voices, bodies, and minds to read the world in which they live. We have to ask ourselves: Do we want our students to be silent victims of a dominant code that makes decisions for them? Or do we hope to open up a human curriculum of learning how to care for one another-- a space where words float up, voices are revealed, and our students look us in the eye and say, "Let me tell you about it."?

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